★ INTERNATIONAL UPDATE ★

• CONCACAF Nations League finals • UEFA Nations League • CONCACAF Gold Cup Prelims
• 2026 World Cup qualifiers • Henry Winter on England's new era under Thomas Tuchel

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The story of the Aston Villa star's rise to the top

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SAUDI ARABIA: NEOM

Building a super club in the desert

DIANA MATHESON Q&A

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Interview with the founder of Canada's new professional women's league

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A STAR RE-BORN...

OUSMANE DEMBELE

***PLUS** all the other standout stars, major talking points and sub-plots from Europe's big five leagues*

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The conclusion of the March international break means two things. Firstly, that a handful of countries can start preparing for next year's World Cup in North America while others can start making other plans, and secondly that we are now into the final straight of the club season.

In this issue, we've addressed both: the winners and losers on the international stage, and the runners and riders in Europe's big five leagues.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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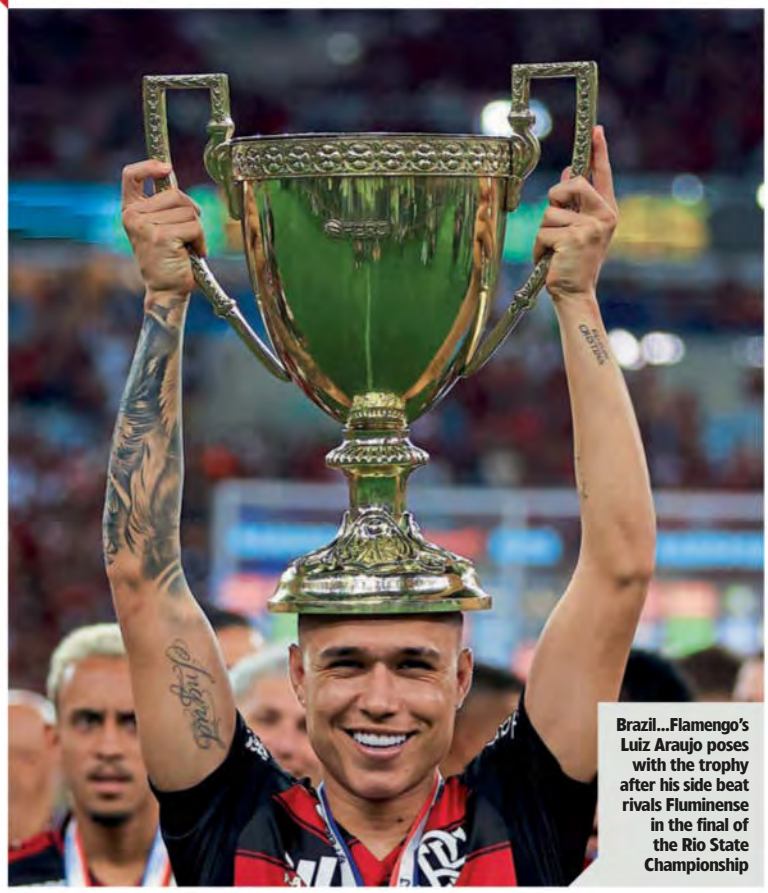
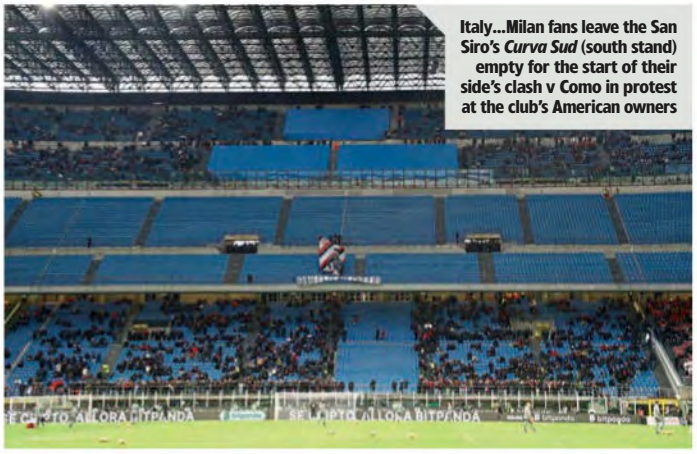
England...Reece James curls a stunning free-kick over the Latvia wall to score his first-ever international goal for the Three Lions



Brazil...Flamengo's Luiz Araujo poses with the trophy after his side beat rivals Fluminense in the final of the Rio State Championship

Mexico...Sergio Ramos celebrates his first goal for new club Monterrey against Santos Laguna, sparking a run of scoring in three consecutive games, including in the CONCACAF Champions Cup versus Vancouver Whitecaps

Germany...Dede and Franck Ribery compete for the ball during the 2025 Beckenbauer Cup, a legends tournament hosted by Bayern Munich



Italy...Milan fans leave the San Siro's *Curva Sud* (south stand) empty for the start of their side's clash v Como in protest at the club's American owners

Greece...Bodo/Glimt players celebrate after beating Olympiacos to reach the Europa League quarter-finals for the first time in their history

England...Newcastle United's Brazilian midfielder Joelinton holds the trophy aloft as the Magpies celebrate beating Liverpool 2-1 in the League Cup final

France...Luka Modric attempts to slow down his Real Madrid team-mate Kylian Mbappe during Croatia's UEFA Nations League quarter-final v France *(more on page 64)*

United States...Panama's players celebrate with TV pundits, including Thierry Henry, after scoring a last-minute winner v USA in the CONCACAF Nations League semi-finals *(more on page 62)*

Kenya...Gabon forward Denis Bouanga tries to wriggle through two challenges during an African 2026 World Cup qualifier v Kenya *(more on page 68)*

Japan...Samurai Blue celebrate after Japan become the first team to qualify for the 2026 World Cup *(more on page 69)*

New Zealand...Fiji's Christopher Wasasala and Tyler Bindon of New Zealand jump for a header during the Oceania 2026 World Cup qualifiers *(more on page 67)*

Argentina...Giuliano Simeone celebrates his first international goal in Argentina's 4-1 thrashing of Brazil, their biggest win over their rivals in 61 years *(more on page 66)*

Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Tuchel's winging wonders

Flying winger... Anthony Gordon

"Pressure is a privilege. Run to it." Anthony Gordon's mission statement will be music to the ears of Thomas Tuchel, who wants England to embrace pressure and also play with more drive out wide. Tuchel desires wingers taking on full-backs, going outside them, rather than turning inside into traffic.

One of the most obvious positives of Tuchel's start as England's head coach has been his commitment to width. The obsession with possession and overloaded midfields has gripped English football in the Pep Guardiola era. Tuchel still likes his full-backs to step into midfield, as debutant Myles Lewis-Skelly did from left-back against Albania and Latvia in the World Cup qualifiers in March, which leads to more responsibility on the wingers to go it alone. It leads to Gordon and Bukayo Saka being the confident fliers to give England wings. Gordon And Saka, England stepping on the GAS, could be headline acts heading to the States. They are not yet as impactful internationally as Spain's Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams but represent the way ahead for England under Tuchel.

His high-intensity approach comes with the caveat about whether England can sustain that pace in the hot conditions expected at the World Cup. I covered USA '94 in Detroit, Chicago and Washington and it was melting (not helped by ridiculous kick-off times). I asked Tuchel about whether his preferred style of play would survive the heat and he nodded, but said that was a debate for when England qualify. It is a concern. Working in bursts, Gordon and Saka can still inflict damage on full-backs, and provide a better service to Harry Kane than he received at Euro 2024.

It's exciting seeing a revival of England wing-play. It's not quite John Barnes in full elegant flight, Chris Waddle scrambling the senses of a full-back, or inspiring old footage capturing the masterful magic of Sir Stanley Matthews, the Wizard of the Dribble. But it should allow England to breathe.

Marcus Rashford, Phil Foden and

Jarrod Bowen failed to give England the width Tuchel wanted against Albania and Latvia. "More dribbling and more aggressive runs towards the box," he demanded afterwards.

By his own admission, Gordon is "not a safe player". He wants to take full-backs on. "I know I'm a nightmare for anyone that I play against." This is just the type of tactical approach and self-belief that Tuchel wants.

England have very strong options out wide. Saka is Mr Right Side, and Tuchel will look forward to his return to fitness. The Arsenal attacker is invariably positive. He doesn't turn back and play the safe pass. He goes at his full-back, is far more robust physically than his sinewy frame suggests. Saka's mentally strong too, as shown when coming back from the horrendous racist abuse he endured online after his penalty was saved in the Euro 2020 final.

Tuchel tried Foden on the right against Albania. That showed Tuchel is still learning about his players. Foden is not a winger, he's a No.10, invariably coming inside from the flanks. Bowen, a more natural fit on the right, replaced Foden against Latvia. The West Ham winger tried to go round the left wing-back, Andrejs Ciganiks, succeeded a couple of times but was baulked a few more.

Saka's usual place doesn't look under threat. Noni Madueke, 23, continues to develop at Chelsea, and away from the club with his personal coach, but still needs to improve his final ball. Tuchel switched Rashford to the right wing at half-time against Latvia. To nobody's great surprise, that flank didn't suit him.

Morgan Rogers went right for a spell against Latvia and earned praise from Tuchel. Another option. So is Arsenal's thrilling teenager Ethan Nwaneri. But, like Rogers, he might prove more effective gliding through the middle.

Over on the left side, England were painfully imbalanced at Euro 2024: Foden, Jude Bellingham and the right-footed Kieran Trippier all featured there under Gareth Southgate. And invariably came inside. Gordon spoke subsequently of his frustration at being given only five minutes (against Slovenia) at the Euros. I was out in Germany, and spoke to the likeable Gordon, whose ready smile belies a steely determination and focus on his craft. He reads deeply about psychology, especially All Blacks legend Dan Carter's *The Art of Winning* and the importance of running towards pressure.

Gordon naturally stretches opposing defences when flying down Newcastle's left. He has pace, work ethic and a hunger to reach the by-line. Gordon deserves to be Tuchel's top pick on the left.

England's head coach likes Rashford, who twice had very good games for Manchester United against Tuchel's Paris Saint-Germain. But that was the past. Rashford still needs to sharpen up. But also he's not a run-and-cross winger. He likes cutting inside onto his right foot, looking for a shot or curling a cross to the far-post.

Positive start...but Tuchel wants more width from his team

Callum Hudson-Odoi, who can play on both flanks, has enjoyed a good season with Nottingham Forest but rarely faces the low blocks that Rashford encountered against Albania and Latvia. Eberechi Eze came on to the left but is more used as a No.10 by Crystal Palace.

Jamie Gittens is a longer-term possibility given his good form with Borussia Dortmund and England's Under-21s. Jack Grealish needs to leave Manchester City, re-find his spark on the left before he can return to England contention. Jadon Sancho also has to stop his career drifting. Tuchel has no time to wait. He needs players in form and Gordon and Saka are his best bet for the World Cup.

Gordon And Saka, England stepping on the GAS, could be headline acts heading to the States

• **Ask Henry** – subscribe to our weekly newsletter at at *worldsoccer.com*

Magpies' magic at Wembley

Being at the Carabao Cup final was an uplifting experience for anyone who cares about the English football pyramid. The final invariably comes down to Premier League sides scrapping it out (not since 2013, and Bradford City, has a team outside the top tier featured). But the story within the story of Newcastle United's deserved win over a tired-looking Liverpool was Dan Burn's fight for his career.

Newcastle's NBA-sized defender, goalscorer and man of the match, proves a stirring role model for young professionals fearing for their future in the game. Burn is also a great example of persistence for anyone facing adversity. Rejected by Newcastle as a kid, playing non-league football, working in a supermarket, never giving up, climbing up the divisions all the way from the fifth tier to the Premier League, and now Wembley, glory and England recognition. The latter all at the age of 32.

Fairy-tale story ...Dan Burn with the League Cup

Burn was a fitting symbol of Newcastle's victory. Their fans never stopped believing that one day they would win a major domestic trophy. It took 70 years. Patience rewarded. Like Burn, they never gave up. The EFL Cup provided a timely reminder of the importance of the pyramid in giving elite cast-offs a second chance. Burn seized his.

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Tensions in CONCACAF

Planning for next year's World Cup has become complicated by North America's political picture

Inside the White House...Gianni Infantino presents the 2025 FIFA Club World Cup ball to Donald Trump

Forget Saudi Arabia's 2034 World Cup, forget the try-to-please-all finals in 2030, the focus is now firmly on one year hence in Canada, Mexico and Donald Trump's United States. No one quite knows what to expect. This is not, initially, because of the unpredictable president but because of the scale of the event.

The finals will feature 48 teams, which is not far short of a quarter of FIFA's membership, demanding a massive swirling movement of not merely teams, officials and media but thousands of fans. Canada and Mexico, with only a comparative handful of early-stage matches, should not be too demanding. The US, however, is another matter.

When the US played host in 1994, inter-city air travel was simple: taxi to the airport, hand over your bag to the redcap on the sidewalk and head for your departure gate. Then came 9/11 and the world changed. Air travel has expanded massively and so have the security controls sadly demanded by volatile modern geopolitics.

> CONCACAF has found itself the meat in a sandwich of international and regional football politics and politics in general

Already AIPS, the international journalists' association, is lobbying for journalists to access the FIFA fast lanes with particular reference to the inter-connections between the three host nations. Recent tales of incommunicado detention for minor visa infractions do not bode well, on top of executive orders shutting out citizens of more than 40 nations.

World Cup host nations must sign up in advance to a guarantee of free entry for competing teams' officials, players, media and fans. That was fine in the past, but now? No wonder that FIFA president Gianni Infantino has been one of Trump's most obsequious cheerleaders. Infantino has a thick skin, which is fortunate since he has taken a vast amount of media flak for his sycophancy, but, to be fair, he has no option: the World Cup is a self-willed prisoner of political delicacy.

For the sake of FIFA, Infantino can be relieved that the delayed kick-off for the European qualifying

competitions has turned the focus of FIFA's wealthiest continent on to the football. This is good news, too, for CONCACAF. The North, Central America and Caribbean confederation has found itself the meat in a sandwich of international and regional football politics and politics in general.

CONCACAF president Victor Montagliani also has his critics but he has largely steered a steady ship since being elected to the poisoned chalice of leadership left by the greedy, self-serving machinations of predecessors such as Jack Warner and Jeffrey Webb.

Montagliani's CONCACAF has forged closer relations with CONMEBOL to the south, developed its tournaments (a Nations League for example), hosted the Centenary Copa America and now even hosts FIFA's legal department in Miami. CONCACAF's status has been further enhanced by the coincidental progress of Major League Soccer with the legitimising arrival of Lionel Messi at Inter Miami. Messi's arrival has been compared by old-timers with the elephant's graveyard of the old North American Soccer League but the promotional context is positively very different.

As Montagliani says, while simultaneously patting himself on the back with hyperbole: "The work we do now will shape the future of football for generations to come."

Developments within CONCACAF have acknowledged the significance of the three-way World Cup hosting. Cindy Parlow Cone, president of US Soccer, was voted (unopposed) onto the FIFA Council, and an important addition to CONCACAF's own council is Mexico's Mikel Arriola. Not everyone is a fan of the man who abolished promotion and relegation in LigaMX but he has a track record of generating football funds, which, obviously, fits the current regional direction of travel.

To the north, Peter Augruso, Canada Soccer president since last May, may be only too pleased for the World Cup hosting to draw attention from domestic turbulence, to say nothing of the cross-border political farrago.

No qualifying pressure for the three countries' national team head coaches. Mauricio Pochettino, Javier Aguirre and Jesse Marsch are planning ahead in the certainty of their seeded presence at the finals, though all must make a decent hash of preparatory results – and if the recent CONCACAF Nations League finals are anything to go by, namely for the US, then there is still plenty of work to do.

"Shaping the future of football for generations to come"...CONCACAF president Victor Montagliani

Beforehand, Pochettino and Aguirre both skirted questions on the political tensions in the region, each declaring that they were not qualified to answer. Marsch though, Canada's American head coach, was more forthright: "If I have one message to our president, it's lay off the ridiculous rhetoric about Canada being the 51st state," said Wisconsin-born Marsch back in February. "As an American, I'm ashamed of the arrogance and disregard we've shown one of our historically oldest, strongest and most loyal allies."

In the meantime Trump's query for Infantino: "Can the US win?" may keep shivers running down Pochettino's spine for the next 12 months or more. No pressure, then.

Trump, apparently oblivious to the fact that this is not the first World Cup in the US, has appointed himself (by executive order, of course) chair of a World Cup task force to co-ordinate with the various federal agencies in planning then staging the finals. All this work has been underway ever since the hosting award in June 2018 but who knew? Asked about sharing the finals with two countries at the heart of trade tensions, Trump said: "Tension is a good thing. I think it's going to make it more exciting."

NEW IOC PRESIDENT ELECTED

Checking which way the political wind is blowing towards sport in general will be Kirsty Coventry, newly-elected president of the International Olympic Committee, ahead of Los Angeles in 2028. No immediate change is on her horizon for football at the Games. She has admitted to no specific stance about the present system of open selection for the women's tournaments and Under-23s (with three overage) for the men's tournament.

The 41-year-old Zimbabwe Sports Minister is the first female and first African to head the Olympic movement. In the tightly-controlled election run-up she did acknowledge football's popularity at the Games. So, do not expect any change there. Like Infantino, she has more than enough on her plate right now.

BOOKS THIS MONTH

SHADES OF GREEN
By Chris Lee (Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

Join football writer Chris Lee on a journey of discovery to learn about one of the world's oldest soccer cultures. Chris travels around Ireland in search of historical stadiums, lost clubs, vibrant fan cultures, symbolic murals and more. From the *tifos* of Dublin's oldest derby to George Best's living room, Chris talks to fans, historians and academics to find out more about the Irish football story. Along the way, he uncovers a complex tale of politics, identity and division, but also one of hope, reconciliation and glory.

TRAILBLAZERS
By Matthew Oldroyd (Pitch Publishing, £25)

Trailblazers: The Groundbreaking History of Nottingham Forest Football Club explores the remarkable pioneering traditions and unique heritage of the Garibaldi Reds, where, in times of peril or unprecedented glory, the club can be linked to many groundbreaking feats that spearheaded football's continuous evolution.

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Fighting on fewer fronts

Injuries have prevented English clubs from sustaining multiple trophy challenges in 2024-25

There has been something very old-fashioned about this Premier League season. This is how football used to be before the Premier League era. By the time Easter approached, everybody was exhausted. Teams would stagger over the line in title run-ins. To challenge on multiple fronts was regarded as so outlandish that when Don Revie spoke of going for what he called "the Triple", it seemed like monstrous hubris. And, indeed, Leeds did regularly run out of gas late on in seasons, which is why their trophy haul was never as great as it perhaps should have been.

Once Newcastle beat Liverpool in the Carabao Cup final, the only English club with a realistic chance of winning more than one trophy was Aston Villa, who were in the quarter-finals of both the FA Cup and Champions League. Arsenal were still in the Champions League but miles adrift of Liverpool. Tottenham and Manchester United were in the quarter-finals of the Europa League but in the lower half of the Premier League, while Chelsea, although still going for a top-five spot, were in the quarter-final of the Conference League. There was a genuine possibility of six different English clubs all winning trophies.

The question then is why, and what does it mean? The positive spin would be that this is indicative of the general strength of the English top flight, a sign of the power of the middle-classes, which means that very few games in the Premier League are foregone conclusions. It feels healthy that only one club is averaging more than two points per game; matches should be competitive. It could even be argued that is a sign of PSR working.

Even if that is true, though, it is not without its drawbacks. A rising middle appears to mean the gulf between the Premier League and Championship widening, and the result of that is, probably, the second successive season in which all three promoted clubs will be relegated.

Struck down... Arsenal's Bukayo Saka is one of a number of players to suffer a hamstring injury this season

> According to Prof Jan Ekstrand of Linkoping University, hamstring injuries are almost twice as common now as in the first 20 years of the century

Any fracture in the pyramid, arguably the greatest glory of English football, the phenomenon that, more than anything else, gives it meaning beyond some rich people employing other rich people to kick a ball for them, is to be resisted.

The wealth of the Premier League – which itself has negative consequences abroad – perhaps supports the idea of a rising middle; the latest *Deloitte* report into football finance shows that 14 of the richest 30 clubs in the world by revenue are English. But there is also a sense that the top clubs have perhaps underperformed. Fatigue and injury appear to be playing a huge part.

There are other factors, of course, and perhaps deeper-lying ones, but the biggest single reason for Manchester City's poor season is the injury to Rodri. They've also had a lot of defensive absences, while Phil Foden is one of a number of players who struggled for form after the Euros. Arsenal were hit earlier in the season by the injury to Martin Odegaard and their title challenge fell away after

Costly injury... Rodri's absence has contributed to Manchester City's poor season

the loss of their entire forward line. Tottenham and Manchester United have both suffered so many injuries they've had games when their bench has been packed with youth-team players. Even Liverpool, who floated above the throng for so long, looked exhausted on losing to Paris Saint-Germain and Newcastle.

Hamstrings are by far the most common problem, accounting for around a quarter of all Premier League injuries over the past two seasons. This is a troubling development. According to Prof Jan Ekstrand of Linkoping University, hamstring injuries are almost twice as common now as in the first 20 years of the century. That fits a general sense that the compacting of the calendar to cope with the COVID lockdown and the winter World Cup in Qatar has had a long-term impact that is compounded by the expansion of competitions. An investigation by Jacob Steinberg in *The Guardian* concluded that hamstring injuries are getting more severe, ruling players out for longer, and that fatigue is to blame. Individual coaches, their training methods and the demands they place on players almost certainly also make a difference but the data is too patchy and inconsistent to be conclusive.

There is, though, a clear feeling within the game that the demands on players are becoming excessive. Numerous players and their union, FIFPRO, have spoken out against the scheduling, while Pep Guardiola has discussed having to extend his squad. A structure that incentivises clubs to stockpile talent so more games happen without the best players cannot be a good thing.

But, equally, something has to give. The competitiveness of this season is welcome – even if it has resulted in an anti-climactic run-in to the Premier League campaign – but there is something seriously amiss if the only way to achieve that is to run players into the ground. The sound of achievement should not be the twanging of hamstrings.

Alex BADOLATO

(Australia & Melbourne Victory)

Joined Melbourne Victory on loan from Western Sydney Wanderers to get the club more drive going forward just before the tournament kicked off, and returned to his new club as a hero after a series of impressive performances in China.

When the pressure was on, Badolato delivered. A goal down in the second group game against Qatar, he pulled his team level and turned the match around. After an hour of the quarter-final, it was 2-1 to Iraq but he then created the equaliser and went on to score a spectacular winner. In the final against Saudi Arabia, which was on a knife edge from minute one to 120, he was an oasis of calm especially when the game entered extra-time and then went on to penalties. He scored in the shootout, of course, and collected the tournament's MVP award.

Hamed AL SHANQITI
(Saudi Arabia & Al Ittihad)
In a country with concerns about too many imported goalkeepers, this No.1 kept three clean sheets and made vital saves, especially in the semi-final shootout win over South Korea.

Mukhammadali URINBOEV
(Uzbekistan & Pakhtakor)
Can play all across the frontline and ended the tournament as the top scorer with four goals. Has already spent time at Brentford and should be back in Europe soon.

KIM Tae-won
(South Korea & Portimonense)
The forward showed impressive composure in front of goal and, as captain, true leadership skills. Kim scored four goals as well, only to miss out on the tournament's Golden Boot to Urinboev due to playing more minutes.

Panagiotis KIKIANIS
(Australia & Adelaide United)
The centre-back was a rock for the first-time Asian Under-20 champions, unsurprisingly given that he has been a regular in Adelaide's A-League defence. Scored the championship-winning penalty too.

John Duerden

"When I heard the terrible news, I poured myself a small brandy"

Petko Ganchev speaking to Bulgarian website BLITZ after his former club Arda Kardzhali held a minute's silence in the mistaken belief that he had died. The club later apologised, saying it has received incorrect information and wished the 78-year-old "many more years of good health"

OBITUARIES

German legend...Doris Fitschen in action at the 1999 World Cup

Doris FITSCHEN (1968-2025)
Libero labelled the "female Beckenbauer", who ranks as one of Germany's greatest women footballers. She won 144 caps and scored 16 goals in an international career that included five triumphant European Championship campaigns as well as an Olympic bronze medal. Domestically, Fitschen won multiple German leagues and cups with TSV Siegen and 1. FFC Frankfurt. Also spent a year in the United States with Philadelphia Charge in 2001.

LUIS CARLOS Galter (1947-2025)
Respected defender who made more than 450 appearances between 1967 and 1975 for Corinthians and then briefly Flamengo with whom he was a Rio State champion in 1974. Luis Carlos played once for Brazil in a friendly win v Paraguay at the Maracana in July 1971.

Junaedi ABDILLAH (1948-2025)
Dubbed "Indonesia's George Best" and one of the country's finest midfielders, first starring in the national youth team that finished runners-up in the Junior Asian Cup in 1967. Helped the seniors to success in the 1968 King's Cup.

Gholamhossein FARZAMI (1945-2025)
Midfielder in the Iran team that won their first Asian Cup in 1968. Farzami, who played his club football with Esteghlal, scored his only international goal in that tournament, in a 4-0 defeat of China. Later he became a director of Esteghlal as well as president of the Iranian squash federation.

Local legend...a public funeral in honour of Gerard Bourgoin

Six-time Serbian title winner...Radisa Ilic

Nico HIDALGO (1992-2025)
As a young midfielder, Hidalgo sufficiently impressed in breaking through at Motril and then Granada to be signed by Juventus in 2014. He never made a first-team appearance in Italy, instead building his career back home in loan spells at Granada and Cadiz, joining the latter permanently in 2017. After two seasons with Racing Santander, he then joined Extremadura when, in 2021, he was diagnosed with lung cancer, which forced him into retirement.

Bejo SUGIANTORO (1977-2025)
Central defender who played 45 times for Indonesia between 1997 and 2004 and was twice a league champion with Persebaya Surabaya.

Alekos ALEXIADIS (1945-2025)
One of the greatest players in the history of Greek side Aris for whom he played between 1963 and 1975, winning the Greek Cup in 1970 and scoring 127 goals in 301 league appearances. Notably scored both goals on his Greece debut in a 2-1 win over Finland in October 1966 but made only one further appearance.

Gerard BOURGOIN (1939-2025)
Butcher's son whose poultry business became one of the largest in France, while he also dabbled in politics and football. Bourgoin's companies not only sponsored Auxerre in the 1970s but, as a qualified pilot, he flew the team to European away matches. Bourgoin was briefly president of the national league and later president of Auxerre. He quit when Auxerre were relegated in 2012, two years after competing in the Champions League.

Radisa ILIC (1977-2025)
Goalkeeper who won three Serbian league titles with Partizan in five seasons and then played in Romania with National Bucharest and Greece with Panserraikos, before winning three more titles back with Partizan. His only appearance for Serbia was a 1-1 friendly draw with North Macedonia in February 2008. He had kept a 45-minute clean sheet when he was substituted at half-time. On retiring, he became goalkeeper coach of Partizan as well as the national team.

Johann PIRKNER (1946-2025)
Prolific Viennese-born centre-forward who totalled more than 130 goals for Admira, Austria Klagenfurt, Alpine Donawitz, FK Austria Vienna and First Vienna. In between, Pirkner spent two seasons in Germany between 1969 and 1971 with Schalke, where he was caught up in the 1971 Bundesliga match-fixing scandal. The DFB banned him for two years, which was commuted down to one year by the Austrian FA after he returned home.

Yet remarkably, Pirkner bounced back. He enjoyed the best years of his career with FK Austria Vienna, winning the league twice and cup once, and was league top scorer with 21 goals in 1975-76 and a European Cup Winners' Cup runner-up in 1978. His form earned selection at the 1978 World Cup in Argentina where, as the oldest member of Austria's squad, he appeared twice as a substitute.

Don KITCHENBRAND (1933-2025)
Powerful South African centre-forward from the steel city of Germiston, who became one of the first Roman Catholics to sign for Rangers when he arrived in Glasgow in 1955 – though he kept his religion a secret.

Kitchenbrand was nicknamed "The Rhino" after scoring 24 goals in his first season to help Rangers win the Scottish league, with his tally including the winner in a 1-0 win over Celtic and five goals in an 8-0 defeat of Queen of the South.

He moved south in 1958 to join Sunderland for whom he top scored in his first season with 21 goals. After that, he returned to play in South Africa and then again briefly in Scotland.

Serhiy ZHURAVLYOV (1959-2025)
Defender from Luhansk, Ukraine, whose career was played out under the Soviet Union with whom he was a European youth champion in 1980. Won the Soviet league twice and cup once with Dynamo Kyiv for whom he played between 1979 and 1984. Later worked in Saudi Arabia before returning to the youth coaching staff at Dynamo.

Words by Keir Radnedge

"I remember one interview I said I would like one day to come back to Tottenham. I am in the USA, so I am not going to talk about that now, but what I said then I still, after six years or five years, feel in my heart"

Mauricio Pochettino hints, in an interview with *Sky Sports*, that he would like to manage Spurs again one day

12 MOVES *you might have missed...*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

Geovany QUENDA

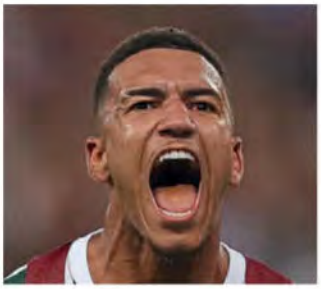
The latest addition to **Chelsea**, the 17-year-old winger will join from Sporting for £44m next summer, while his team-mate Dario Essugo will join this summer for £18.5m.

Deivid WASHINGTON

Another young Chelsea prospect, Brazil Under-20 forward Washington returned to his first club **Santos** in February. The striker will stay there on loan for the rest of 2025.

Vitor ROQUE

Signed by Barcelona in 2023 amid huge expectations, the striker went back to Brazil in February, joining **Palmeiras** for €25.5m – a record fee for a South American club.



Kaua ELIAS

Continuing a tradition of recruiting talented young Brazilians, **Shakhtar Donetsk** signed 18-year-old striker Elias from Fluminense, as well as Atletico Mineiro winger Alisson.

Igor TUDOR

The former **Juventus** defender returned to manage his old club until the end of the season after the sacking of Thiago Motta (*more on page 29*).

Amadou DIAWARA

After being released by Belgian side Anderlecht, the midfielder, who cost Roma €21m back in 2019, joined **Eldense** near the bottom of the Spanish second division.

Deniz GUL

Five months after switching his international allegiance, the Porto striker made his debut for **Turkey**. The Stockholm-born 19-year-old won 12 youth caps for Sweden.

Mohamed KALLON

One of the most talented players in **Sierra Leone**'s history, playing for the likes of Inter and Monaco, took his first managerial role in charge of his country's national team.

Benni McCARTHY

The former Premier League centre-forward, who had been working as a coach at Manchester United, took his first international job as the new manager of **Kenya**.

Aliou CISSE

Senegal's captain at the 2002 World Cup, who then won the 2021 AFCON as manager of his country, was appointed as the new head coach of **Libya**.

Kevin GAMEIRO

The former **France** striker retired in March. A four-time Europa League winner (three with Sevilla, one with Atletico Madrid), his last club was boyhood side Strasbourg in Ligue 1.

Alvaro NEGREDO

Another ex-La Liga striker to hang up his boots. A title winner with Manchester City and a European champion with **Spain**, Negredo's last club was Real Valladolid.

"Finally, the court has dispensed justice, and for me, my family and my friends this is a big thing. I'm full of emotion right now"

Ex-FIFA president Sepp Blatter speaks out after both he and former UEFA president Michel Platini were cleared of corruption by a Swiss court

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

4
Teams that have secured their places at the 2026 World Cup finals alongside the three North American co-hosts: Japan, Iran, New Zealand and Argentina.

$1bn
Total prize money that will be on offer at the expanded 2025 FIFA Club World Cup, including up to $125 million for the winners.

31
Confirmed teams at this summer's Club World Cup after Mexican side Leon were removed by FIFA for failing to meet tournament criteria on multi-club ownership. Both they and fellow CWC qualifiers Pachuca are owned by Grupo Pachuca.

132
International matches that Portugal legend Cristiano Ronaldo has won, a new record for a men's player.

9
Months that Lyon head coach Paulo Fonseca was suspended for after angrily confronting a referee during his team's Ligue 1 clash with Brest.

Seeing red... Lyon coach Paulo Fonseca

38,502
Attendance for Newcastle United and Sunderland's Tyne-Wear derby in the Women's Championship in March, surpassing the second tier's previous record of 15,387.

Women's UEFA Champions League semi-finalists...Alessia Russo scores for Arsenal in their comeback win against Real Madrid

2
Number of English clubs in the semi-finals of the Women's UEFA Champions League after Chelsea came back to beat Manchester City 3-2 on aggregate and join Arsenal. The Blues will play Barcelona next, while the Gunners take on Lyon.

4
Further years that Patrice Motsepe will serve as CAF president after he was re-elected to the Confederation of African Football post.

17
Months that Neymar was out of the Brazil squad before being recalled in March – only to miss out on the 2026 World Cup qualifiers due to injury.

1
English players to have scored ten Champions League goals in one season after Harry Kane reached the milestone in the last-16 second leg against Bayer Leverkusen.

£2bn
Estimated cost of Manchester United's proposed new "iconic" 100,000-seater stadium, plans for which were unveiled in March.

17
Age of Pisa winger Louis Buffon when he made his senior debut in March, the same age as his father Gianluigi was when he made his professional bow 30 years ago.

132
Japan caps won by Yuki Nagasato, who announced her retirement in March. Having last played for her country in 2016, she spent her latter club years in the NWSL but made history in 2020 when she played for Hayabusa Eleven, a senior men's team in Japan.

10
Minutes that Dele Alli's Como debut lasted. The ex-Tottenham Hotspur and England midfielder was sent off shortly after coming off the bench against Milan in his first game for over two years.

Dismissed...Dele leaves the San Siro pitch

24
Days that Pakistan's FIFA ban lasted before it was lifted after the country's FA agreed to a new constitution ahead of March's 2027 Asian Cup qualifiers.

2
Goals scored in the first-ever crossover match between the NWSL and USL Super League, as Gotham FC drew 1-1 at Tampa Bay Sun before winning on penalties.

3
Hat-tricks scored by Mika Biereth in his first six Ligue 1 games after joining Monaco from Sturm Graz in January. The Denmark striker came through Arsenal's academy.

Hat-trick hero...Monaco hot-shot Mika Biereth

2
World Cup ties remaining in Asia's third qualifying round for the UAE when they decided to sack their Portuguese coach Paulo Bento.

94
Matches that it took Manchester City striker Erling Haaland to reach 100 Premier League goal involvements – the quickest of any player in the league's history.

2
Number of transfer windows the Premier League will have this summer to allow Manchester City and Chelsea to sign players ahead of the Club World Cup.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

FEBRUARY 2025

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	12
Alisson (Liverpool)	7
David Raya (Arsenal)	5
Matz Sels (Nottingham Forest)	4
Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	4
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	3
Michele Di Gregorio (Juventus)	3
Caoimhin Kelleher (Liverpool)	3
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	3
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	3
David De Gea (Fiorentina)	2
Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig)	2
Franco Israel (Sporting)	2
Alex Meret (Napoli)	2
Inaki Pena (Barcelona)	2
Noah Atubolu (Freiburg)	1
Marco Carnesecchi (Atalanta)	1
Lucas Chevalier (Lille)	1
Kepa Arrizabalaga (Bournemouth)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Simon Mignolet (Club Brugge)	1
Vanja Milinkovic-Savic (Torino)	1
Kevin Trapp (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Michael Zetterer (Werder Bremen)	1

DEFENDERS

Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	30
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	20
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	13
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	10
Gabriel (Arsenal)	9
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	9
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	7
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	7
Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	6
Willi Orban (RB Leipzig)	6
Jonathan Tah (Bayer Leverkusen)	6
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	5
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	5
Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	5
William Saliba (Arsenal)	5
Bremer (Juventus)	4
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	4
Jose Maria Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	4
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	4
Isak Hien (Atalanta)	4
Kim Min-jae (Bayern Munich)	4
Ibrahima Konate (Liverpool)	4
Marcos Llorente (Atletico Madrid)	4
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	3
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	3
Federico Gatti (Juventus)	3
Clement Lenglet (Atletico Madrid)	3
Nuno Mendes (PSG)	3
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	3
Raul Asencio (Real Madrid)	2
Alejandro Balde (Barcelona)	2
Ramy Bensebaini (B. Dortmund)	2
Conor Bradley (Liverpool)	2
Alessandro Buongiorno (Napoli)	2
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	2
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	2
Lucas Digne (Aston Villa)	2
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	2
Dean Huijsen (Bournemouth)	2
Sead Kolasinac (Atalanta)	2
Inigo Martinez (Barcelona)	2
Murillo (Nottingham Forest)	2
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	2
Dani Vivian (Athletic Club)	2
Ola Aina (Nottingham Forest)	1
Angelino (Roma)	1
Juan Cabal (Juventus)	1
Andrea Cambiaso (Juventus)	1
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	1
Ousmane Diomande (Sporting)	1
Dodo (Fiorentina)	1
Matthias Ginter (Freiburg)	1
Robin Gosens (Fiorentina)	1
Raphael Guerreiro (Bayern Munich)	1
Jorrel Hato (Ajax)	1
Caio Henrique (Monaco)	1
Juan Jesus (Napoli)	1
Dominik Kohr (Mainz)	1
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	1
Diego Llorente (Real Betis)	1
Gianluca Mancini (Roma)	1
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	1
Nikola Milenkovic (Nottingham Forest)	1
Pedro Porro (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
David Raum (RB Leipzig)	1
Amir Rrahmani (Napoli)	1
Nico Schlotterbeck (B. Dortmund)	1
Oumar Solet (Udinese)	1
John Stones (Manchester City)	1
Nicolas Tagliafico (Lyon)	1
Edmond Tapsoba (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Jurrien Timber (Arsenal)	1
Pau Torres (Aston Villa)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	18
Cole Palmer (Chelsea)	17
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	13
Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool)	10
Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	9
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	9
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	8
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	7
Pedri (Barcelona)	7
Charles De Ketelaere (Atalanta)	6
Rodrigo De Paul (Atletico Madrid)	6
Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	5
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	4
Marten de Roon (Atalanta)	3
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	3
Scott McTominay (Napoli)	3
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	3
Adrien Rabiot (Marseille)	3
Tijjani Reijnders (Milan)	3
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	3
Marc Casado (Barcelona)	2
Davide Frattesi (Internazionale)	2
Giovani Lo Celso (Real Betis)	2
Vitinha (PSG)	2
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	1
Moises Caicedo (Chelsea)	1
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	1
Mikkel Damsgaard (Brentford)	1
Angel Di Maria (Benfica)	1
Fermin Lopez (Barcelona)	1
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	1
Morgan Gibbs-White (Nott'm Forest)	1
Leon Goretzka (Bayern Munich)	1
Bruno Guimaraes (Newcastle United)	1
Morten Hjulmand (Sporting)	1
Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Marseille)	1
Ardon Jashari (Club Brugge)	1
Stanislav Lobotka (Napoli)	1
Alexis Mac Allister (Liverpool)	1
James Maddison (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Internazionale)	1
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	1
Joao Neves (PSG)	1
Matheus Nunes (Manchester City)	1
Dani Olmo (Barcelona)	1
Aleksandar Pavlovic (Bayern Munich)	1
Rodri (Manchester City)	1
Oihan Sancet (Athletic Club)	1
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	1
Malik Tillman (PSV)	1
Lucas Torreira (Galatasaray)	1
Hans Vanaken (Club Brugge)	1
Joey Veerman (PSV)	1
Granit Xhaka (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Piotr Zielinski (Internazionale)	1

FORWARDS

Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	36
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	25
Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid)	20
Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	17
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	11
Raphinha (Barcelona)	11
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	11
Viktor Gyokeres (Sporting)	8
Omar Marmoush (Manchester City)	8
Ousmane Dembele (PSG)	7
Alexander Isak (Newcastle United)	7
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	6
Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)	5
Rodrygo (Real Madrid)	5
Cody Gakpo (Liverpool)	4
Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (PSG)	4
Ademola Lookman (Atalanta)	4
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	4
Kerem Akturkoglu (Benfica)	3
Bradley Barcola (PSG)	3
Mateo Retegui (Atalanta)	3
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	3
Serhou Guirassy (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Justin Kluivert (Bournemouth)	2
Patrik Schick (Bayer Leverkusen)	2
Mattia Zaccagni (Lazio)	2
Samu Aghehowa (Porto)	1
Jamie Gittens (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Kai Havertz (Arsenal)	1
Joao Pedro (Brighton)	1
Randal Kolo Muani (Juventus)	1
Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton)	1
Lois Openda (RB Leipzig)	1
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	1
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	1
Giuliano Simeone (Atletico Madrid)	1
Matias Soule (Roma)	1
Alexander Sorloth (Atletico Madrid)	1
Chemsdine Talbi (Club Brugge)	1
Marcus Thuram (Internazionale)	1
Timothy Weah (Juventus)	1
Nico Williams (Athletic Club)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

2024-25 SEASON UPDATE

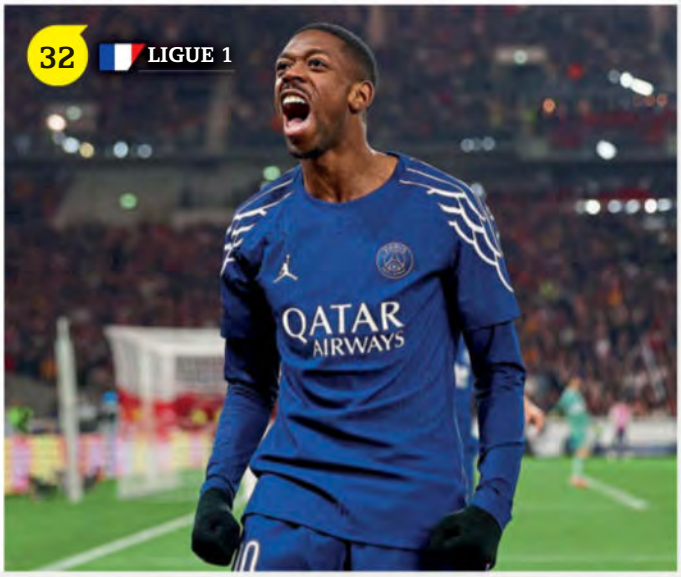
As Europe's top five leagues approach the business end of the campaign, we pose the main questions and attempt to tackle the big talking points of the season so far

24 PREMIER LEAGUE

26 LA LIGA

28 SERIE A

30 BUNDESLIGA



32 LIGUE 1

Premier League update

Standout managers... Arne Slot and Nuno Espirito Santo on the touchline at Anfield

How have Liverpool adjusted so seamlessly to life after Klopp?
Few foresaw Arne Slot succeeding the charismatic Jurgen Klopp at Liverpool so seamlessly in the league. Only £10 million spent, too, and that on a back-up forward in Federico Chiesa. Slot tightened the defence, made the midfield more controlled, improved players like Ryan Gravenberch, Dominik Szoboszlai and Cody Gakpo, and built a mood and platform that brought the best out of Mohamed Salah. Slot is also decisive, setting the tone with his half-time hooking of Jarell Quansah in Liverpool's first game of the season.

He has made mistakes, like not respecting the FA Cup sufficiently and not resting players against bottom-placed Southampton at Anfield before facing the epic challenge of PSG in the Champions League and Newcastle in the EFL Cup final. But Liverpool's run in the league delights their fans. They love their master tactician, their manager who seemed totally controlled until revealing a volcanic streak after dropping points at Goodison Park. Slot's very human, and very good. He's a leader who bleeds red. No wonder the Kop feels he's a worthy successor to Klopp.

Who has been the standout manager of the year so far?
The first, and perhaps only, manager to get the better of Slot in the Premier League: Nuno Espirito Santo.

Nottingham Forest's push for a Champions League place has been a joy to watch. It has been a lesson in sound recruitment (Nikola Milenkovic), well-organised and determined defence (Milenkovic and Murillo), and speed of mind and body in transition (Morgan Gibbs-White, Anthony Elanga and Callum Hudson-Odoi). Throw in a centre-forward in Chris Wood enjoying the season of his life, and a 33-year-old goalkeeper who looks unrecognisable from the player that struggled at Newcastle in Matz Sels, and Forest have been the complete package.

The author of one of the stories of the Premier League season is a humble, likeable former goalkeeper. Nuno's tactical tweaks, such as playing Elanga off Wood to stifle Manchester City supply lines, makes Nuno a real contender with Slot as manager of the season. Nuno organises and motivates and is clearly adored by Forest's players and supporters. He's calm but there is a deep passion within driving him on. Nuno cares for his players as people and that makes them even more committed to him and the Forest cause.

VAR troubles... referee Jarred Gillett consults the monitor

Will VAR ever work in the Premier League?
Technology is supposed to improve

Nottingham Forest's push for a Champions League place has been a joy to watch

season on season. More familiarity, more fine-tuning. The elite referees' group, PGMOL, argues that decisions are better. VAR mistakes are down by a half. But the perception remains of a system scarring games with too-long delays and too-irrelevant interruptions. And a few embarrassing incorrect interventions, such as ordering the awarding of a penalty for a foul by Manchester United's Matthijs de Ligt on West Ham's Danny Ings when the ref rightly ruled an accidental collision. There were other occasions when VAR failed to intervene such as when United's Bruno Fernandes was sent off for a challenge on Spurs' James Maddison. The decision was overturned by the FA.

VAR's problem is partly that it encourages *laissez-faire* refereeing amongst the on-field official, who waits for technology's intervention if unsure. The sooner that more in-stadium communication and explanation of decisions by referees is allowed by IFAB, the law-makers, the better. VAR has also highlighted flaws with the Laws such as double-touch penalties which IFAB needs to address.

Rebuild required... will Pep Guardiola's City bounce back?

Where has it all gone wrong for Manchester City?

Manchester City's travails have filled many startling headlines this season. Nobody expected Pep Guardiola and his serial champions to be scrambling for a Champions League place.

In hindsight – that most precious of commodities – City should have addressed their ageing squad quicker. They should have brought in more pace and mobility, especially in central midfield and defence. Injuries have inhibited City and especially the loss of Rodri, who is ball-winner, passer, controller, leader and standards-setter on and off the field. John Stones has also been absent for significant periods. City's defence was also always going to miss Ruben Dias when he was out.

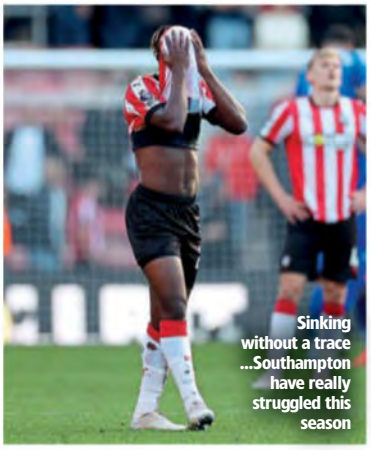
Questions were briefly raised about Guardiola's appetite for the fray after season after gruelling season. He committed to two more years, Erling Haaland signed until 2034, and the club began rejuvenating the squad in January. Omar Marmoush looks a particularly good signing in attack. City will surely recover but this has been a chastening season.

Has the gap to the Championship become too big?

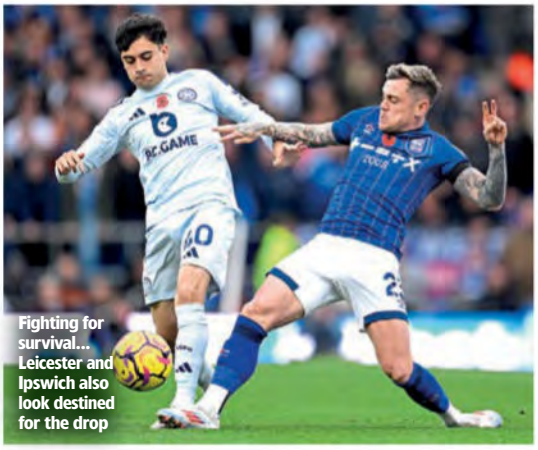
Gravity is a grave concern for both the Premier League and the EFL. There may be a late-season twist, but it looks likely that the three promoted teams, Southampton, Leicester City and Ipswich Town, are destined for relegation. Individual dynamics affect each club: Southampton's naivety in possession at the back, Leicester's issues in defence and Ipswich basically over-achieving in a second successive promotion (even with investment, Ipswich have an EFL-level defence).

Whatever the specific club flaws, it is bad for the Premier League and bad for the Championship. A stagnant pond in the top division is unhealthy. There needs to be strong flow into the Premier League, with those that do go down having made a fight of it. They haven't. The current trio are sliding quietly towards their fate and through the trap door.

Ipswich will still have enjoyed the journey – Portman Road has been buzzing – and the reputation of their young manager, Kieran McKenna, remains intact. But the Saints and Leicester will feel only rancour.



Sinking without a trace ...Southampton have really struggled this season



Fighting for survival... Leicester and Ipswich also look destined for the drop

La Liga update

Which team currently has the upper hand in the title race?
"*Hay Liga.*" That's the phrase that gets bandied around Spanish football when the title race is heating up. And this season, without doubt, *hay Liga*: ahead of March's international break, the big three – Real Madrid, Barcelona and Atletico Madrid – were all in with a chance of the title.

Barca started life under Hansi Flick extremely well, winning 11 of their first 12 league matches to open up a nine-point lead at the top of the table. But a slump in form from November to January, when they won just one in eight league matches, allowed the chasing pack to catch up.

They've already played Atleti twice – including their stunning 4-2 comeback win at the Metropolitano just before the international break, which avenged their 2-1 home defeat earlier in the season – but still have to welcome their *Clasico* rivals in May, a mouth-watering clash so close to the end of the season. The Catalan club have got the better of *Los Blancos* in head-to-heads so far this season, including an emphatic 4-0 league win at the Bernabeu in October.

Carlo Ancelotti's reigning champions remain in the hunt, despite a slew of issues. The Italian coach has struggled to replace Toni Kroos' influence in the midfield, while long-term injury absentees Dani Carvajal, David Alaba and Eder Militao remain out. Last season's talisman Jude Bellingham and star forward Vinicius Junior have also had less impact.

As for Atleti, they remain many people's underdogs, largely due to their historic "*pupas*" – bad luck. Their Champions League round-of-16 tie was another example of that, losing the penalty shootout to their Madrid rivals after Julian Alvarez's converted spot-kick was voided by VAR for a double touch. Still, disappointing as that exit was, their emptier calendar could give them an edge over their rivals, as could their solid defence and formidable home record.

Ancelotti believes it will go down to the wire: "It's difficult to find a more competitive league than Spain," he said. "In Italy there aren't many teams competing, and in England there's Liverpool. Here, there are three teams...it's a league that will be decided in the last game."

***Hay Liga*...Barca and Real Madrid are tussling for the league title**

In the hunt... Atletico Madrid are making it a three-horse race

Will Mbappe win the Pichichi?
Having claimed Ligue 1's Golden Boot for the past six seasons, Kylian Mbappe is well accustomed to picking up top-scorer gongs. It says a lot about the expectations that have been placed upon the Frenchman that his form has been the subject of much criticism this season, despite him scoring ten goals

Hot property... Rayo Vallecano coach Inigo Perez

in his first ten La Liga matches of 2025.

That hot streak has put him in sight of Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski, who has been incredibly clinical once again this campaign, netting 22 goals in his first 26 league appearances.

The Poland striker's relationship with his attacking team-mates could make the difference. Barca's trio of him, Lamine Yamal and Raphinha has been the most effective in the league, while Mbappe is still waiting to gel with Vinicius and Co.

Who have been this season's surprise packages?

Rayo Vallecano, who began the season as relegation candidates, are looking like strong contenders for a European spot. Since last season's 17th-place finish their coach Inigo Perez, who was assistant to Andoni Iraola before he left for Bournemouth in 2023, has turned their fortunes around. Perez was supposed to follow Iraola to Bournemouth, but a failed work permit has fast-tracked his own managerial career.

This season, he has rediscovered the organised chaos of Iraola's 2022-23 side: a dynamic, vertical style of football that presses high and tries to get the ball into the opposition area as fast as possible. It's not just exciting, it's successful: they've taken points off several teams above them in the table, including Real Madrid and Atletico. Even more impressive is that Rayo are doing this with the oldest average line-up in the league and without any superstar names.

What's the controversy with refereeing and VAR this season?

In February, Real Madrid asked for the "immediate submission of VAR audio" when lodging a formal complaint to the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) over decisions in their 1-0 defeat to Espanyol, claiming that refereeing has: "reached a level of manipulation and adulteration of the competition that can no longer be ignored".

> Ahead of March's international break, the big three – Real Madrid, Barcelona and Atletico Madrid – were all in with a chance of the title

La Liga president Javier Tebas responded by saying that the club had "lost their minds" and "have constructed a narrative of victimhood that is not true".

Some bridges appear to be building, with Real Madrid since attending a committee meeting with the RFEF, the Referees Committee, La Liga and elected clubs to discuss reforms to the refereeing system. But it has been reported that the club will only support a new system if it involves the shift to an independent refereeing body, financially and organisationally autonomous from La Liga and the RFEF.

What's the situation with Ronaldo's Real Valladolid?

Despite being the largest region in the country by area, Castile and Leon has only one top-flight club, Real Valladolid, but they're almost certain to be relegated. *Pucela*, who have been owned by Ronaldo Nazario since 2018, are bottom of the table and well adrift of safety.

After being promoted as runners-up from the Segunda Division in 2023-24, this season's drop will mark their third relegation in five years, continuing the yo-yo trend the club have followed under the Brazil legend's ownership. Disgruntled fans have protested his presidency, most vociferously during November's 5-0 home thrashing to Atletico Madrid, after which coach Paulo Pezzolano was fired.

Ronaldo seemed to appease Valladolid supporters in December by announcing his intention to sell up in order to run for the presidency of the Confederation of Brazilian Football, but that bid came to an end in March. What that means for his future in Spain remains to be seen, but an immediate answer appears unlikely with buyers unwilling to match his valuation. Relegation won't help matters.

"Go Home"... Valladolid fans protest against owner Ronaldo

Serie A update

In pursuit of leaders Internazionale...Napoli boss Antonio Conte celebrates with his players

Vital win...Inter players celebrate beating Atalanta away in March

How exciting is the Serie A title race this season?

Even if the same old face, reigning champions Internazionale, are out in front as we run into the final furlong of the 2024-25 Serie A title race, do not think for one minute that this has been a predictable and dull season.

For a start, since August, no fewer than six different teams – Atalanta, Inter, Juventus, Napoli, Torino and Udinese – have, at different times, led the race. At the heart of the contest has been a ding-dong battle involving Inter, Napoli and Atalanta.

Previewing this year's title contest last summer, your correspondent was one of many commentators who suggested that Inter remained the strongest side in the land. For a start, they retained all the key elements in the squad that finished 19 points ahead of arch-rivals Milan last season. Players like centre-back Francesco Acerbi, left-back Federico Dimarco, midfielders Nicolo Barella and Hakan Calhanoglu, striker Marcus Thuram and, above all, captain and central striker Lautaro Martinez then and now mean that Inter continue to look like the strongest club in the land.

Sunday, March 16 may have marked a decisive turn, with Inter defeating third-placed Atalanta 2-0 in Bergamo, while second-placed Napoli could only draw 0-0 away to relegation-threatened Venezia.

Former Italy and Milan coach, Arrigo Sacchi, declared that only Champions League commitments could slow down Inter, with Simone Inzaghi's side the only *Scudetto* contenders with European fixtures to contend with. There is all still to play for but, as *Gazzetta dello Sport* splashed across one of its March headlines: "*L'Inter Scappa*" – "Inter Are Getting Away".

Which of Napoli or Atalanta are best placed to catch Inter?

Helped by the obvious fact that towards the end of March they were three points ahead of Atalanta, Napoli have the edge.

Having missed out on European football this season, Napoli ought, by any measure, to be the fresher (or perhaps the less tired) of the two teams. Atalanta have done brilliantly this season, but in their Champions League elimination by Club Brugge and their more recent 2-0 defeat by Inter there was a suggestion that Gian Piero Gasperini's squad might have run out of gas.

What has gone wrong at Milan?

A shaky defence that looks far from the golden years of Baresi, Maldini, Costacurta et al, the lack of an outstanding striker, the lack of an experienced player with the personality to steer the ship through stormy waters in the manner of a Zlatan Ibrahimovic – that and much more are just some of the reasons why it has seemingly all gone wrong for Milan this season.

The turning point of an already troubled campaign came in late

Serie A strugglers ...Milan

Empoli star...Tino Anjorin has shone this term

February when the seven-time European champions were dumped out of the Champions League by Feyenoord. Just over a week later, supporters inside the San Siro expressed their displeasure by protesting during the 2-1 home defeat to Lazio, only arriving 15 minutes into the game and then calling for American owners RedBird to sell the club.

All is (not yet) lost for Milan. If they can find a way past city rivals Inter in the semi-finals of the Coppa Italia – a game that represents a re-run of January's SuperCoppa final win in Saudi Arabia – they may yet be able to salvage something from the campaign.

Why did Juventus sack Thiago Motta?
Brilliant at Bologna last season, taking them into the Champions League, Motta never quite clicked as Juventus manager. The writing was on the wall after March's 4-0 home defeat to Atalanta, and his fate was sealed after losing 3-0 to Fiorentina a week later. That result left Juventus in fifth spot, 12 points off the leaders, and the Brazilian-born coach, who won 30 caps for Italy, looking for a new job.

> There is all still to play for but, as *Gazzetta dello Sport* splashed across one of its March headlines: "*L'Inter Scappa*" – "Inter Are Getting Away"

Those defeats were only Juventus' second and third of the Serie A season, but far too many draws left them off the pace in the *Scudetto* race. A significant summer outlay – Teun Koopmeiners from Atalanta and Douglas Luiz from Aston Villa were the two most expensive signings in Italy last year – heightened the scrutiny on Motta. Media reports said that, by the end, players had lost faith in his ability to turn things around.

It didn't help his cause that his old club have fared so well in his absence. Bologna's fans feared the worst when Juve came calling last summer, yet his successor, ex-Fiorentina boss Vincenzo Italiano, has picked up where Motta left off. At the end of March, the Red and Blues were keeping Juve out of the Champions League spots.

Which of Serie A's British contingent has stood out most this season?
Serie A is currently home to several England and Scotland internationals – Tammy Abraham, Fikayo Tomori, Ruben Loftus-Cheek and Kyle Walker (Milan), Lewis Ferguson (Bologna), Che Adams (Torino) and Scott McTominay and Billy Gilmour (Napoli) – yet perhaps Serie A's most intriguing British performer is one without any senior caps at all.

Tino Anjorin was highly rated when he made his Chelsea debut in 2019 at the age of 17, but never established himself at Stamford Bridge, in part due to a series of unfortunate injuries, and joined Empoli last summer. After a promising start, the club have slid down the table and are now in a relegation battle. But whatever happens, it's hard to see Anjorin playing in Serie B next season. In January, he was linked with Juventus and RB Leipzig.

In contrast, poor old Dele Alli marked his first game for Como – and first professional match for any club in two years – by being sent off inside ten minutes after coming off the substitutes' bench against Milan.

Sacked...Motta during his final game in charge of Juventus

Bundesliga update

Disastrous season ...Dortmund's players react to another defeat

Has Borussia Dortmund's new head coach turned things around?
Dortmund's *Jekyll and Hyde* tendencies over the past two seasons, competitive in the Champions League while fading to grey in the Bundesliga, continues to have everyone connected with the Ruhr giants scratching their heads. After a far from impressive fifth-place finish last term, only scraping into the Champions League qualifying spots, the *Schwarz-Gelben* have fared even worse in the current Bundesliga campaign. After losing no fewer than 11 of their first 26 fixtures, they were floundering in mid-table and displaying all manner of mental, physical and collective deficiencies.

Former midfielder Nuri Sahin, brought in as head coach last summer, never had the requisite charisma and experience to make an impact. When the axe fell in January, the Black-and-Yellows turned to the former Eintracht Frankfurt and Bayern Munich boss Niko Kovac, who knows he too will be gone in a hurry if he does not extinguish the blaze. Kovac is Dortmund's ninth coach since Jurgen Klopp left in 2015.

How are Bayern Munich's contract negotiations progressing?
Three down, four to go. After months of stop-start contract talks interspersed with rumours of a move to England, Spain, Italy or France, long-serving midfielder Joshua Kimmich finally concluded that the grass was not greener elsewhere, agreeing to an extension keeping him at the Allianz Arena until 2029. The announcement came shortly after Jamal Musiala and Alphonso Davies too signed long-term contracts.

Kimmich's decision came as a surprise. An uneasy relationship with former coach Thomas Tuchel, who made no secret of his assessment that Kimmich was not a reliable defensive midfielder, had the experienced Germany international seriously considering his options. As recently as February, the Bayern board let it be known that a new contract offer had been withdrawn, claiming Kimmich was taking too long to make his mind up.

Normally there is no way back for a player when Bayern call time on the renegotiation process, but when you're the captain of Germany, the channels of communication never close; two weeks later, the deal was done. "Kimmich will be the bridge between the present generation and our next era," said Bayern CEO Jan-Christian Dreesen, who still has work to do.

Dayot Upamecano, whose current deal expires in 2026, is reportedly close to penning a new deal, while Leroy Sane is set for renewal talks ahead of his current deal expiring this summer.

Staying put ...Joshua Kimmich

Dreaming of Europe...high-flying Mainz

Red Bull's head of global soccer ...Jurgen Klopp

> Who would bet against Mainz ending up in Champions League dreamland?

Leon Goretzka and Serge Gnabry, both contracted to 2026, will have to wait their turns.

Who is the most-improved team in the Bundesliga this campaign?
Mainz take this honour by a country mile. Under the shrewd, energising aegis of their 50-year-old Danish coach Bo Henriksen, the Hesse club have been confounding the odds for well over a year now, pulling off the most amazing of relegation escape acts in the second half of last season, and now flying high in the Bundesliga – third before the March international break, to be exact.

Mainz, who have only competed in Europe on four previous occasions, would be delighted with a Europa League or Conference League ticket. But who would bet against them ending up in Champions League dreamland, emulating the likes of Stuttgart last season and Union Berlin the year before? No team in the country has more fire in its belly than Henriksen's crew and, besides their togetherness, hunger and excellent organisation, they have a number of fine individuals: free-scoring forward Jonathan Burkardt and the talented midfield quartet of Nadiem Amiri, Kaishu Sano, Paul Nebel and Lee Jae-sung.

What is at the top of Jurgen Klopp's RB Leipzig in-tray?
All those who thought Jurgen Klopp was taking on a backseat, ceremonial gig when appointed head of global soccer at the Red Bull stable of clubs really should think again.

After finishing in the top four in each of the last six Bundesliga campaigns, RB Leipzig have looked far less convincing this term. Should they fail to make the Champions League cut, Klopp, along with the club's sport CEO Marcel Schafer, will have a big call to make: stick with incumbent coach Marco Rose, or twist and install a new driver at the controls?

With the squad still squarely behind Rose, Klopp's instinct would be to keep faith with the incumbent. However, top-level football is an unforgiving business and the case for a new trainer may be a persuasive one, built around a dismal sequence of just three wins in 11 games after the winter break and the team's habit of giving up the ghost after taking the lead. The stakes could not be higher. Without Champions League football, an exodus of talent (Benjamin Sesko, Xavi Simons and Castello Lukeba) is likely.

Out of form... Werder Bremen's goalkeeper Michael Zetterer picks the ball out of his net

What has gone wrong at Werder Bremen?
Werder Bremen's triumphant past – four Bundesliga titles and the European Cup Winners' Cup in 1991-92 – only serves to highlight how far the northerners have fallen. While they remain clear of the relegation shake-up, little has gone right for the Green-Whites this term, taking until late October to score their first goal at home and picking up a meagre eight points from their first 11 Spring Championship fixtures.

Little wonder head coach Ole Werner cuts the figure of a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders, and why wouldn't he when seeing his charges turn individual errors into an art form. Take goalkeeper Michael Zetterer. Not so long ago, many pundits were predicting a *Nationalmannschaft* future for him, but following a number of errors, he was overlooked for Germany's Nations League squad in March. Nor is a powder puff attack helping their cause, with a large proportion of their problems stemming from the mysterious loss of form of striker Marvin Ducksch.

Ligue 1 update

Marseille boss... Roberto De Zerbi

Who has been PSG's standout player?
In the wake of the departures of Kylian Mbappe, Lionel Messi and Neymar, PSG have embraced a new strategy where the collective is the star. But in their absence, a new star has been (re)born.

Ousmane Dembele is, quite simply, a player transformed. When Luis Enrique described the former Barcelona winger as "the most destabilising player in the world" last season, it was as much a distraction from his erratic finishing as it was a compliment. Re-positioned and re-purposed as a centre-forward – with Bradley Barcola and new boy Khvicha Kvaratskhelia electric on the wings – Dembele has shown a completely different facet to his game, netting an incredible 22 goals in his first 17 games of 2025. If this metamorphosis of form continues, and delivers more trophies, individual awards surely beckon.

"Given his form at the minute, he shouldn't set himself any limits," said his compatriot Mbappe. Even the Ballon

Can anyone close the gap to Paris Saint-Germain?
If anything, the gap has got wider. Progression in the Champions League at the expense of Liverpool earned PSG European acclaim, as Virgil van Dijk described Luis Enrique's side as the best he has faced this season, and domestically they are peerless. "For me, in Ligue 1 today, there is PSG and then there are the others," said Lille manager Bruno Genesio. "They are on a different planet to the 17 other teams in the league."

Since QSI's takeover of PSG back in 2011, there has been a vacuum of sustained competition. Montpellier, Monaco and Lille (twice) have all won Ligue 1 titles in that time, but no team has managed to consistently push PSG in recent years. There is a clamour in France for that to change, but the financial divide is impossible to bridge.

Marseille are the likeliest candidates. Turbulent and inconsistent, yes, but in Roberto De Zerbi there is a manager of global acclaim, while with the arrival of the likes of Adrien Rabiot, Amine Gouiri, Mason Greenwood, Ismael Bennacer and Pierre Emile-Hojbjerg, there is a concerted effort to provide the manager with the tools to compete. Paul Pogba may yet arrive in the summer too.

In the distance, but building in momentum, is the spectre of the ambitious project at Paris FC. Now under the Red Bull umbrella and backed by the Arnault Family, who topped *Forbes'* rich list in 2024, promotion from Ligue 2 is very much on the agenda. Being able to challenge their city rivals, however, may take some time.

Reinvented... PSG striker Ousmane Dembele

d'Or, so coveted by Mbappe, is not beyond Ligue 1's top goalscorer.

How has INEOS stepping away from Nice affected the club?
"They've been so much better without our interference," said Sir Jim Ratcliffe of a Nice side that are the envy of Manchester. With both them and United participating in the Europa League this season, UEFA forced INEOS to have a hands-off approach at Nice this term. But Ratcliffe isn't being missed at the Allianz Riviera – far from it. *Les Aiglons* are competing for a top-three finish and, to add insult to Old Trafford injury, they are doing so with the type of free-flowing 3-4-3 that Ruben Amorim is still trying to implement at United.

Ratcliffe outlandishly stated that "the level of football is not high enough" at Nice in a recent interview, yet it is Franck Haise's side that are on course for European qualification and Manchester United who linger in mid-table.

Flying high... Nice haven't missed Jim Ratcliffe and INEOS

Are Montpellier in danger of following Bordeaux?
Almost 13 years have elapsed since Montpellier shocked the football world and won the Ligue 1 title. Since then, the club, just like their stadium, have slowly slipped into a state of dereliction. "Let's be happy just to be in Ligue 1," declared president Laurent Nicollin earlier this season. "In a world where we don't have big financial means, being in Ligue 1 is exceptional in itself."

But they may not be in the top flight for much longer. Now in search of investors to save the club, they are engaged in an even more desperate search for points. Rock-bottom of Ligue 1 before the March international break, they sunk to a new low when their game with fellow strugglers Saint-Etienne was abandoned after a fire was caused by flares set off by their own supporters in the stands.

Given their perilous finances, there is fear of what relegation will mean for the former champions, particularly just a year on from the sad decline of another famous French club, Girondins de Bordeaux, who were sent all the way down to the fourth tier amid financial problems.

Match abandoned...Montpellier fans light flares in the stands at the Stade de la Mosson

Why are so many French clubs facing financial problems?
Financial crises at many clubs were exacerbated by a poorly-negotiated TV rights deal, hastily sealed just weeks before the start of the season.

> Re-purposed as a centre-forward, Ousmane Dembele has shown a completely different facet to his game, netting an incredible 22 goals in his first 17 games of 2025

The governing body, the LFP, wanted €1 billion. They got half that. The purse strings have been tightened around France and clubs like Lens have had to have fire sales to cover themselves. Brice Samba, David Pereira da Costa, Kevin Danso, Przemyslaw Frankowski and Abdukodir Khusanov all left the Stade Bollaert-Delelis in the winter window.

Ligue 1's major broadcaster, DAZN, have gone public in expressing their discontent with their debut season broadcasting France's top flight, citing the authorities' inaction in the face of piracy and clubs' unwilingness to collaborate on content as reasons why figures are significantly below their break-even point. Having withheld a payment, there has since been a reconciliation of sorts. But is it a lasting one? Or will DAZN make a swift exit at the end of the season, leaving Ligue 1 to sink further into the mire?

ASTON VILLA
Betano

being suitable for them. But we knew there was more about Ollie.

"I'll never forget, we played a four-v-four switching-play drill, showing them press, cover and release to defend and create an overload in attack," explains Taylor. "The ball came to Ollie, he just flicked it over his head and the defender. I hadn't coached that.

"He tapped it in with a great big beaming smile, and I just said to him: 'Well, you could do it that way as well, Ollie.' He solved the problem. That is what football is about: controlling chaos as a defender, creating it as an attacker. That is my abiding memory of Ollie, his smile, his determination. He was humble, he wasn't flashy.

"He grew quite rapidly, which changed the way he played. He took off as an individual. Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard. He was going out and training when others went in, honing his abilities because he loved football."

Watkins joined Exeter's academy in 2004, a year after initially being rejected by the club. Ten years later, having progressed through the academy, he made his first-team debut. After a number of substitute appearances under manager Paul Tisdale, he was sent on loan to Weston-Super-Mare in the National League South (then known as the Conference South), the sixth tier of English football. A return of ten goals in 24 appearances was respectable if unspectacular, but it proved a key turning point in his career.

"Ollie really liked playing on the left wing. That is where he preferred and we played him there at first," said Tisdale in an interview with *Sky Sports*. "I went to watch him when he was on loan there and he was just not making any progress because he was stood on the wing waiting for people to pass the ball to him. I told him at that point that he could not play there anymore because it was not helping him psychologically in terms of how he saw his contribution to the game. The only way that was going to happen was if he played in a position where he felt that at any moment the ball could be coming his way. So we moved him and he played as a striker."

> "The ball came to Ollie, he just flicked it over his head and the defender. I hadn't coached that"
>
> **Mark Taylor, Watkins' former youth coach**

Patience was needed on his return to Exeter as he adjusted to his new role,

and it wasn't until the 2016-17 season that he established himself as a first-team regular. But a return of 15 goals and seven assists in 48 league games, firing the Grecians to the League Two play-off final in the process, was enough to impress Brentford, who paid £2 million to sign him. For the Bees manager at the time, Dean Smith, it was the end of a long pursuit, having tried to sign him twice before: once as manager of Walsall after watching him at Weston-Super-Mare, and then again for the Bees in the summer of 2016.

Smith would become a vital figure in Watkins' development, later taking him to Aston Villa in a £28m deal in 2020. But that followed an incredible spell in West London, where Watkins formed a strong relationship with team-mates Said Benrahma and Bryan Mbeumo. The trio were affectionately dubbed "BMW".

"Dean Smith should be praised for recognising Ollie's talent at the lower level that could and did achieve in the Championship with Brentford and Premier League with Villa and then the international stage," says Taylor. "With the BMW at Brentford, Dean recognised he had three really good strikers and could get one to cut in from the left, another to cut in from the right."

Smith left Villa in 2021 but Watkins has continued to thrive at the club under Steven Gerrard and now Unai Emery, with whom he has reached new heights both individually and as part of the team. Still, he hasn't forgotten the influence that Smith had on his career.

"From day one, I got on so well with Dean," Watkins told *Sky Sports* in 2023. "He saw me when I was at Weston-Super-Mare on loan when he was the Walsall manager and he wanted to sign me then. I didn't realise that. When he went to Brentford, he bought me from Exeter.

"Since then we have had a good relationship and I still ring and speak to him now."

Bees star...Watkins in action for Brentford

Key influence... Dean Smith signed Watkins twice

Still, Watkins' best displays have come under Emery. The Spaniard guided Villa to fourth place in the Premier League last season, with Watkins the biggest weapon in his arsenal. With 32 goal contributions in 37 Premier League games (19 goals and 13 assists), he was their driving force, and it propelled him into Gareth Southgate's England squad at Euro 2024.

Although he started every game on the bench, making just three appearances and playing less than an hour in total, he produced one of the most memorable moments in England tournament history with his last-minute winner against the Netherlands in the semi-final.

To many fans, the low, drilled finish looked opportunistic. But not to Smith: "The amount of times I've seen him score almost that exact goal, I can't begin to count," he said in an interview with *The Telegraph*. "He used to do that drill with one of the coaches, Richard O'Kelly, all the time at Brentford and Villa. The touch, and the finish, doesn't surprise me at all. It wasn't instinct, it was practice. He's practised so hard at that."

Watkins spent the tournament rubbing shoulders with team-mates like Bukayo Saka, Phil Foden and Jude Bellingham, all of whom had much

straighter career paths, rising quickly after being thrust into the spotlight at early ages. They also all came from footballing hotbeds – London, Manchester, Birmingham – something that cannot be said for Watkins. The southwest of England has never been a prolific developer of footballing talent, but Taylor believes that Watkins has helped put it on the map with his determination to overcome adversity.

"There is talent in the West Country and the country in general," he says. "Just because someone says no once or twice, it doesn't mean they are right. Ollie believed in himself and put everything he could into football. I would drive past the training pitch and see him training on his own. Football was it for him."

Villa's form in 2024-25 has been less consistent, yet their centre-forward has continued to score goals and is very much on track to match last season's output. In January, an approach from Arsenal was rejected – shortly after Watkins had put a dent in their title hopes by scoring in a 2-2 draw at the Emirates. A self-confessed Gunners fan, he shrugged off any uncertainty over his immediate future by scoring his first Champions League goal in a 4-2 victory over Celtic to fire Villa into the knockout rounds. Now, with Unai Emery's men having cruised past Belgians Club Brugge in the round of 16, Watkins has a showpiece quarter-final tie with Liverpool's conquerors Paris Saint-Germain to look forward to.

Practice makes perfect...Watkins' dramatic winner v the Netherlands was a well-rehearsed move

> "The touch, and the finish, doesn't surprise me at all. It wasn't instinct, it was practice. He's practised so hard at that"
>
> **Dean Smith, Watkins' former manager, on his winning goal against the Netherlands at Euro 2024**

It's all a far cry from those early days at Buckland Athletic and Weston-Super-Mare. But, for a player with Watkins' work-rate and desire, it is no less than he deserves.

ABOVE: Thorn in Arsenal's side...Watkins celebrates scoring yet another goal at the Emirates Stadium
BELOW: In the big time...Watkins nets his first-ever Champions League goal, firing Villa to the knockouts

eyewitness

Mike Tuckerman reports

AUSTRALIA

Preston Lions roaring again

On the approach to the Genis Steel Stadium on a match day, you can almost smell the ground before you see it. The smoke from the open-air barbecues churning out thousands of Macedonian-style kebapi rolls wafts over the stands of the compact ground long before kick-off.

Long renowned as one of Melbourne's most historic clubs, Preston Lions are enjoying something of a revival as they welcome arch-rivals South Melbourne to the northern suburb of Reservoir on a cool March night. By the time the final whistle blows, the Preston supporters among the heaving crowd of 9,036 will be celebrating their first win over their fiercest rivals since 1987.

Almost 16 years after they were first relegated from the top tier of Victorian football, the club founded by Macedonian migrants in 1947 are back where they feel they belong.

The clash with South Melbourne – a club that draws the majority of its support from the city's sizeable Greek community – is one of the standout fixtures on the Australian football calendar.

Genis Steel Stadium... home of Preston Lions
Photo credit: Matt Johnson

The fact that it takes place in Victoria's semi-professional state league and not in the fully-professional A-League says much about the fractured nature of Australia's football landscape.

"'One day we'll be back,' " Preston Lions' club president, David Cvetkovski, tells *World Soccer*. "That's one of the lines from our club anthem – and we've been singing it for the past 15-and-a-half years."

The National Premier Leagues (NPL) Victoria is one of eight regional leagues that exist across the country, effectively the second tier of Australian football below the A-League. Last season, Preston secured promotion that took them back to the NPL Victoria for the first time since 2009.

It was a return that seemed a long way off when Preston dropped as low as the third tier in 2012, where they faced sides like La Trobe University and FC Clifton Hill. It was a far cry from the club's halcyon days, when they competed against the best clubs in Australia after winning promotion to the National Soccer League (NSL), the forerunner to the modern A-League, in 1981. Then known as Preston Makedonia, they remained in the top flight until 1993, when financial issues and crowd disturbances led to the club's relegation. By the time the A-League came along to replace the NSL in 2005, Preston were in no position to join the fledgling league.

The topic of promotion and relegation remains a hot-button issue in Australian football, with the A-League effectively

Stark contrast ...Melbourne City players celebrate in a near-empty AAMI Park

Sell-out crowd...Preston Lions fans watch on *Photo credit: Matt Johnson*

a closed competition, representing only one part of the country's soccer tapestry.

The fault lines were on full display the night that Preston hosted South Melbourne, given that a very different story was unfolding some 15 kilometres across town at AAMI Park.

Opened in 2010 as Melbourne's premier rectangular stadium in a city dominated by the oval-code Australian rules football, the 30,000-capacity AAMI Park is home to both A-League foundation club Melbourne Victory and their expansion rivals Melbourne City.

But while Preston attracted more than 9,000 fans to their suburban home in Reservoir, just a few miles away, only 3,569 turned up to AAMI Park to see Melbourne City defeat Macarthur FC 2-0 on the same night. That's despite the club being backed by the riches of the City Football Group.

The Abu Dhabi-headquartered group's presence in Australian football has not been without controversy, even if they provided a lifeline when they took over ailing expansion side Melbourne Heart in January 2014. After rebranding the club, Melbourne City were crowned champions for the first and only time when they downed Sydney FC 3-1 in a COVID-affected Grand Final in June 2021.

Kebapi roll...a Macedonian hot dog *Photo credit: Matt Johnson*

> "'One day we'll be back', that's one of the lines from our club anthem – and we've been singing it for the past 15-and-a-half years"
>
> **Preston Lions club president David Cvetkovski**

They lost the following season's Grand Final to fellow expansion side Western United, before one of the most fractious campaigns in Australian football history exploded into acrimony barely 18 months later.

It was during that season that the cash-strapped Australian Professional Leagues (APL), the governing body that administers the A-League, elected to sell Grand Final hosting rights to the city of Sydney and its tourism arm, Destination NSW; previously, the final would be hosted by whichever team had finished higher during the regular season. The deal was worth a reported AU$12 million – a significant sum to an A-League still reeling from the effects of the pandemic – but it sparked widespread chaos across the competition.

Calls from fans for a league-wide boycott went largely unheeded, until matters came to a head in December 2022, when dozens of Melbourne Victory fans stormed the pitch at a violent Melbourne derby, resulting in then-City goalkeeper Tom Glover requiring stitches after he was struck in the face with a metal bucket. The match was postponed and completed four months later, with City ultimately prevailing 2-1 en route to their fourth Grand Final in succession. But the damage had been done.

City powerbrokers watched on as their opponents Central Coast Mariners produced a display for the ages, running out rampant 6-1 winners. By the end of the year, the APL had abandoned the Grand Final sale, concluding one of the strangest episodes in the A-League's chequered history.

The whole debacle left a bitter taste in the mouths of fans. Melbourne City's

Preston Lions club president...David Cvetkovski (C) during the announcement of the inaugural Australian Championship, the country's new second-tier competition

chief executive Brad Rowse has cited it as one of the reasons for the club's stubbornly small crowds, telling supporters at a fan forum in late 2024 the A-League was still recovering from decisions made in the past.

All of which is a world away from Preston Lions.

When they were drawn against South Melbourne in the preliminary rounds of the 2024 Australia Cup – a national knockout competition that draws teams from the A-League down to the regional leagues – a crowd of 6,347 flocked to the Genis Steel Stadium on a cold Tuesday night.

They've enjoyed similar attendances since being promoted back to the Victorian top flight, with the so-called "Macedonian derby" against Altona Magic – another club founded by Macedonian immigrants – attracting some 5,400 paying spectators.

The level of support comes as no surprise to Naum Sekulovski, a former Australia youth international and one of the club's favourite sons.

Known affectionately as "*Batka*", or "Brother", the long-time former Perth Glory defender finished his playing career in the red of Preston, joining the Lions for a second stint when they were still struggling in the third tier of Victorian football.

"When you think of the history of migration in Australia, a lot of those migrants were looking for somewhere they could call home," says Sekulovski. "A club like Preston was always somewhere the community could come together and speak a common language."

Those close community ties have resulted in multi-generational support, with Preston now able to call upon the sort of crowds many A-League clubs can only dream of. "Outside of the country itself, it's probably the biggest Macedonian club in the world," adds Sekulovski.

For the likes of Sekulovski and club president Cvetkovski – whose father played for Preston in the 1960s – a night out at the Genis Steel Stadium is a family affair. But the Lions are starting to attract fans from well beyond the local Macedonian diaspora. General manager Jason Goldsmith admits plenty of "football hipsters" are now turning up in Reservoir, attracted by big crowds and the chance to enjoy the kind of authentic matchday experience that A-League clubs

Opening goal...Gian Albano celebrates after scoring from the penalty spot
Photo credit: Matt Johnson

Penalty...South Melbourne's keeper brings down Jason Romero before Preston's opener *Photo credit: Matt Johnson*

have struggled to replicate.

"I was attending Preston games long before I became general manager because I live nearby," says Goldsmith. "They're really something to behold, as the fans travel from everywhere and it's not that plastic kind of a feel you sometimes get in a large, cavernous stadium."

It's the kind of support yet another tier in Australia's convoluted football landscape aims to tap into. After years of delays, a new national second-tier competition called the Australian Championship kicks off in October, with Preston one of three Melbourne clubs chosen to represent Victorian football.

It's not a genuine second division as the rest of the world knows it, but rather a "Champions League-inspired" competition with a group stage and knockout round, which will be played alongside the regular league season. Eight foundation clubs will take part, along with another eight top-of-the-table finishers from Australia's various state-based competitions.

While there's no promotion to the A-League yet, it won't stop fans of sides like Preston from dreaming.

They couldn't have asked for a more dramatic encounter than their first win over South Melbourne in almost 40 years, as a converted Panenka from Gian Albano and a second on the break from former Melbourne Victory winger Lleyton Brooks saw off the visitors.

No one expects Preston to draw huge crowds to every NPL Victoria fixture they play. But on a night when almost three times as many fans turned up at a state league game than the A-League fixture down the road, it was a stark reminder that some of Australia's most historic clubs are back where they belong – and can no longer be ignored.

> "Outside of the country itself, it's probably the biggest Macedonian club in the world"
>
> **Former Preston Lions star Naum Sekulovski**

Party time...Preston Lions players celebrate with their supporters *Photo credit: Matt Johnson*

Eye on MCOs

Juve Stabia

The second-tier Italian club are the poster boys for an ambitious project, Brera Holdings, which is the first MCO group to be floated on a stock market

Chasing promotion ...Juve Stabia are flying high in Serie B this campaign

MCO FILES

Club: Juve Stabia
Owners: Brera Holdings (38.46 per cent)
MCO connections: Brera Holdings also owns Italian amateur club Brera FC, a stake in Black Bulls in Mozambique and Ilch FC in Mongolia, and 90 per cent of FK Brera Strumica in North Macedonia.
Player connections: Two players are expected to move from Africa to FK Brera Strumica this summer, providing visas can be arranged.

Italy is fertile ground for investors looking to build up multi-club portfolios. Only three countries – the United States, England and Spain – have more clubs in MCO than Italy, where 26 sides have owners or shareholders with control or significant holdings in other teams. More than half of Serie A's clubs are majority foreign-owned, including nine by North American investors. Now, Juve Stabia, a previously unheralded club with American owners, are mounting a surprise challenge to join that contingent.

Based at Castellammare di Stabia near Naples, the club has origins dating back 120 years but a history featuring as many collapses as championships.

The original Stabia Sporting Club filed for bankruptcy in 1933. Reformed the same year as AC Stabia, the club went bankrupt again two decades later and Societa Sportiva Juventus Stabia took over as Castellammare di Stabia's main club. A third bankruptcy would follow in 2001, but the following year entrepreneur Paolo D'Arco acquired Serie D's Comprensorio Nola and renamed them Juve Stabia.

The club featured sporadically in Serie B without much success but this season, under head coach Guido Pagliuca, Juve Stabia are hovering around the promotion play-offs despite having the division's lowest wage bill at just

€5.63 million. To provide some context, Sassuolo and Salernitana operate with €26.5m and €20m respectively, while 11 other Serie B sides have budgets of over €10m.

An unheralded squad bolstered by key loans such as Poland centre-back Patryk Peda from Palermo and Lazio's Romano Floriani Mussolini (great-grandson of Italy's former leader, Benito) has helped the club surpass modest expectations, but president Andrea Langella needed outside investment to bolster that challenge. Like so many other clubs in Italy, that led to US investors adding to an MCO portfolio.

Brera Holdings began investing in Juve Stabia in the autumn of 2024. In February 2025, that stake was raised to 38.46 per cent with a plan to take this to 52 per cent with Settembre Holding and Langella retaining the balance.

Many US MCO investors – notably Lyon and Botafogo owner John Textor – talk about building a portfolio of clubs to float on a stock market, but Brera Holdings was the first, doing so with a more modest strategy.

The group grew out of Brera FC, an amateur team founded in 2000 by Alessandro Aleotti that liked to describe itself as Milan's third team – after Milan and Inter – and was focused more on social initiatives. There is a link to the city's traditional giants through the stadium, the historic Arena Civica, where Brera play their home games and where both Milan and Inter used to play.

"We could maybe have existed as the third club of Milan surviving on the players they do not want and maybe reach Serie C, but we didn't want to do that," says Aleotti's son Leo. "Instead of thinking vertically, we thought horizontally and went abroad."

That was driven by a group of investors led by Detroit native Dan McClory who acquired Brera in 2022 and listed the club on the junior US stock exchange, the Nasdaq, in January 2023, raising $7.5m.

Since then, Brera has set about building up a low-key portfolio of clubs. In spring 2023, Brera took a 90 per cent stake in North Macedonian club Akademija Pandev. The club was originally named after its founder, local legend Goran Pandev, who spent the majority of his playing career in Italy at seven different clubs. He retained the other ten per cent, but the club was renamed to Brera Strumica while Pandev joined the Brera board.

Stadio Romeo Menti... home of Juve Stabia

A new club, Brera Tchumene, was founded in Matola, Mozambique, and Mongolian Premier League side Ilch FC was subsequently added to the portfolio in Autumn 2023.

Using Strumica, Brera has also taken control of North Macedonian women's side Tiverija Strumica, which was the first time that private ownership was permitted in a female side. Outside of football, Brera also owns Milan-based women's volleyball team UYBA, which plays in the top division in Italy.

Loan signing...Patryk Peda arrived from Palermo in January

In February 2024 an advisory board was formed, including former United States Soccer Federation president Alan Rothenberg, a driving force behind Major League Soccer.

Other well-known figures involved with Brera include former Italy striker Giuseppe Rossi and Chris Gardner, whose rags to riches story was made into a film, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, starring Will Smith.

On the field, the other clubs in Brera's MCO portfolio initially outpaced expectations.

Tchumene strolled through the regional Maputo Championship, losing just one game in their debut season, although the last season in the top flight proved more challenging. The club finished 11th out of 12 but stayed up as the league is being expanded to 14 teams.

Vasco Imparato, Tchumene's Brazilian chief executive officer, says: "Starting a new club isn't easy, but honestly the toughest part is navigating a country like Mozambique. Low level of education, no infrastructure, terrible bureaucracy. You have to go totally against the current in every sense.

"Funding other than direct investment is non-existent. Player trading can bring returns in the medium term but usually you still

North Macedonia legend...Goran Pandev

Arena Civica...the historic home of Brera FC

have to negotiate free transfers with a percentage of future sale retained.

"We found as a group that having a 100 per cent proprietary club is bad business. The ideal scenario is that of a partnership with local investors."

That has led to Brera putting Tchumene on hold and announcing a deal in February 2025 to take a stake in Black Bulls, the Maputo-based champions of the 2024 Mocambola that are owned by local transport magnate, Junaide Lalgy.

In North Macedonia, Pandev has been appointed sports director for the national team, raising the Brera profile, but Strumica have largely languished in lower mid-table.

In Mongolia, Ilch was only founded in 2020 and had won successive promotions under different names before another name change to Bayanzurkh Sporting Ilch for the club's debut in the country's Premier League in 2023. This name was again changed after Brera acquired Ilch, who finished eighth in the ten-team Mongolian Premier League in 2024. A new general manager from

> Many US MCO investors talk about building a portfolio of clubs to float on a stock market, but Brera Holdings was the first

Diehard fans... Juve Stabia ultras

Italy will arrive for the 2025 season.

Financially, Brera have produced disappointing results since listing on the Nasdaq. In the 2023 calendar year, the group posted a loss of €1.15m despite revenue of €4.44m. However, in the first half of last year net losses leapt €3.2m on revenue of just €1.4m with €900,220 coming from sponsorships and €249,963 from player transfers.

In March 2024, McClory took a majority stake of 64 per cent, but he is candid about making money from football.

"No teams are making money on a profit and loss basis," he says. "I don't think any team can make money unless they have a return from transfers.

"Our teams are loss-making but we are able to acquire clubs at an economical price and [for investors] it's about the capital gain. The development of talent will bring us closer to profitability but any team that gets promoted to Serie A is worth $100m to $150m. We have a three-year plan and hopefully, with the modest amount of money we can bring, that's possible."

Steve Menary

Facetoface

"We decided to just do it"

DAN McCLORY, BRERA HOLDINGS CEO

What attracted you to Juve Stabia?
Every team in Serie B can beat every team in MLS, but by the time you've paid the franchise fee it's $600m for an MLS team – and that's not affordable. We looked at eight teams in Italy and got term sheets from four before we decided on Juve Stabia and met some strange people on the way. I like working with people who succeed with scarcity rather than abundance. That's what appealed to me about Juve Stabia: backing the people who get things done.

Brera is the first multi-club ownership group in the world to float on a stock market. How did that happen?
It was an interesting proposal and I've taken 60 companies onto Nasdaq through my job at Boustead Securities. What boggles my imagination is that you chat to people who have raised $100m and say they have $2bn behind them and they've not done anything. We decided to just do it. We are only doing what we are doing at a modest level.

Why do you think other investors have been more hesitant?
I would say: "Do they really have the money?" There are call funds out there where they can go back to people and say: "I have a proposal, what do you think?" It doesn't mean they have the money.

What part of the world will Brera look to expand to next?
We looked long and hard at Australia, including buying the top team, but the instability there from the FA is a pause for thought. But we like the market in Australia, everything from the cost of entry to the quality of the players and player pathway. Australia is also a land of immigrants and two of the areas with the most immigrants are where we already have clubs: Italy and Macedonia. It's a coming attraction but not in the near term.

INTERNATIONAL ROUND-UP

All the action from March's window, including 2026 World Cup qualifiers and regional competitions in Europe and CONCACAF

UEFA Nations League...France players celebrate progress to the finals *(more on page 64)*

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MEXICO CROWNED UNDISPUTED KINGS OF CONCACAF

CONCACAF Nations League winners...Mexico star Raul Jimenez lifts the trophy

If any doubts remained as to whether Nations League tournaments would be taken seriously by the countries involved, they were allayed in this CONCACAF edition that saw Mexico emerge victorious for the first time.

From iconic celebrations to fiery rivalries against a backdrop of political tension, there were incidents throughout as each of the four teams were determined to show their strength.

By the end of the four games, Mexico had reasserted their dominance in the region, adding a first Nations League trophy to sit alongside the Gold Cup title they currently hold.

Panama and Canada also showed promising signs but it was a tournament to forget for the United States and their head coach Mauricio Pochettino, whose first shot at a trophy in his new role ended with two defeats.

Mexico's triumph was driven by Fulham centre-forward Raul Jimenez, who was named the competition's best player. His four goals in the finals – two against Canada in the semi-final and two more in the final against Panama – not only secured the Golden Boot, they also took him ahead of Cuauhtemoc Blanco to become *El Tri's* third leading scorer of all time with 39 goals. Only Javier Hernandez (52) and Jared Borgetti (46) are now ahead of him.

The new name on the trophy ended a period of United States dominance. The USMNT had won each of the three prior editions but were unable to back up their pre-tournament confidence this time around.

Away from the pitch, the US have riled their neighbours in recent months, including all three of their fellow finalists. The new United States administration under Donald Trump has suggested Canada should become the "51st state" and threatened to claim the Panama Canal, but has met significant resistance from both countries. Trump's government has also moved to rename the Gulf of Mexico the "Gulf of America". These political tensions, as they often do, spilt over into the sporting arena where the US met similar resistance on the pitch.

Disappointing ...USA captain Christian Pulisic reacts to Panama's semi-final winner

Pochettino commented in the build-up to this tournament that with the help of President Trump and the fans, the United States could win the upcoming World Cup, but his team didn't manage to win a game in the Nations League finals.

Their poor run began as Panama maintained their impressive record against the United States in major tournament football, having overcome them in the 2023 Gold Cup and the 2024 Copa America.

A late goal from Cecilio Waterman took Panama through to the final at the USA's expense. Immediately after

scoring, Waterman jumped on the *CBS* broadcast platform behind the goal where Thierry Henry was working as a pundit, shouting: "You are my idol!" before he and eventually the entire Panama team embraced the Arsenal and France legend in a memorable moment.

Then, in the third-place play-off, the US could not cope with Canada. Coach Jesse Marsch was sent to the stands for going too far with protests against two penalty decisions he felt went against his team, but the Canadians still won 2-1 with Lille's in-demand striker Jonathan David scoring the winner in the second half.

The final saw Panama put in another strong showing, continuing to demonstrate they can mix it with the best in the region, but a needless handball from Jose Cordoba gave Jimenez the chance to score from the penalty spot and handed Mexico the win in added time.

It wasn't the most convincing performance from Mexico, but they won't be too fussed with the manner of the victory as they now hold both CONCACAF titles. They were also well supported at the SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California where all of these games were held; there was certainly no home advantage for the USA.

The two semi-finals, along with the third-place play-off and final, were each set up as double headers. Mexico were the clear headline act on both occasions, meaning the first semi-final between the United States and Panama, and the third-place game between the US and Canada drew only sparse crowds as Mexico fans bought up the majority of tickets.

> Mexico reasserted their dominance in the CONCACAF region, adding a first Nations League trophy to sit alongside the Gold Cup title they currently hold

It was not a good look for those early games in isolation, especially in a stadium that will represent the Los Angeles area at the 2026 World Cup. When Mexico and Panama met in the Gold Cup final at the same stadium in 2023, they were watched by a sold-out crowd of 70,000, and this Nations League final wasn't far behind with an attendance of 68,212. Pretty much all of them hung around to celebrate Mexico's consolidation of their place as CONCACAF's top team.

James Nalton

Heading to the Gold Cup...Costa Rica's Josimar Alcocer was on target in the big win over Belize

GOLD CUP LINE-UP COMPLETED

Almost half of the teams participating in this summer's CONCACAF Gold Cup were decided by a single round of two-legged preliminary ties from which seven nations progressed to the 16-team final tournament in June.

It was a potentially precarious qualification path for those who had left it this late, but the seeding of the draw – pitting the highest-ranked team against the lowest, the second-highest against the second-lowest and so on – gave the favourites a considerable advantage. It made for a potentially lopsided group of games at the top end of the draw and closer encounters once you got down to Suriname (ninth) v Martinique (sixth) and Guadeloupe (eighth) v Nicaragua (seventh).

As the games played out, most teams took the advantage given to them by the draw, but there was potential for an early upset as St Vincent & Grenadines (ranked 13th) scored first in the home leg of their tie with No.2 ranked Jamaica. The hosts took a shock 1-0 lead with just over an hour played when Oalex Anderson broke through the Jamaican defence and slotted past Andre Blake, sparking wild scenes at the packed Arnos Vale cricket and football stadium in St Vincent.

Goalkeeper Lemus Christopher contributed to the performance for the home team with some great saves, but the St Vincent players fell to the floor in despair after conceding a late penalty which was converted by Aston Villa winger Leon Bailey to level the tie.

Jamaica lived up to expectations in the second leg, recording a 3-0 win in Kingston to make the aggregate score look more comfortable. They will also take encouragement from the fact that their head coach, Steve McClaren, has managed to persuade star player Bailey to return to the national team fold. But the first leg showed that despite their quality in attack, they can still be vulnerable in defence.

Top seeds Costa Rica showed their strength with a 13-1 aggregate victory against Belize in the most lopsided of the ranking differentials, while Trinidad & Tobago secured an aggregate win as expected against Cuba. Though the game in Santiago de Cuba was a fairly even affair that finished 2-1 to the visitors, T&T eased to a 4-0 win in their home leg to get new coach Dwight Yorke off to a good start.

Bermuda v Honduras produced one of the most entertaining games of these prelims. Bermuda took a 2-0 lead in the first half at their national stadium before Honduras scored three goals in six minutes in the second period, eventually winning the game 5-3. After a routine 2-0 home win in the second leg, Honduras progressed with a 7-3 aggregate scoreline.

Only one of these ties witnessed a turnaround from the first leg. Guyana set the scene for a potential upset by beating Guatemala 3-2 thanks to an Isaiah Jones hat-trick, but the favourites got the job done in the second leg with a 2-0 win back in Guatemala City.

As expected, the games lower down the draw were the closest but still produced clear winners as Suriname and Guadeloupe both won 2-0 on aggregate against Martinique and Nicaragua respectively.

The 16-team line-up is now set for this diverse regional tournament, whose participants will arrive all the way from Canada in the north to Suriname in the south.

James Nalton

COMEBACKS, GOAL-FESTS AND LATE DRAMA MAKE FOR THRILLING QUARTER-FINALS

UEFA's decision to substitute tedious international friendlies with the more competitive edge of the Nations League continues to pay epic dividends.

Take the League A quarter-finals in the 2024-25 Nations League, all of which were so fiercely contested that three of the four went to extra-time, two were decided by penalty shootouts and one involved a surreal back-from-the-dead experience.

The Netherlands-Spain clash, which the Iberians eventually won 5-4 on penalties, was typical of the thrilling fare on the menu: ten goals over the two ties (a 2-2 draw in Rotterdam and 3-3 share of the spoils in Valencia), constant shifts in ascendancy and lashings of wondrous attacking moments – not least Lamine Yamal's brilliant goal for Spain in extra-time. The unfortunate Dutch can only take heart from the resilience they showed, fighting back to equalise on no fewer than four occasions.

Mediocre in almost all departments when slumping to a 2-0 first-leg reverse in Split, Croatia, France – as is their wont under long-serving head coach Didier Deschamps – somehow found a way to dig themselves out of a self-inflicted hole, winning by the same scoreline at a rocking Stade de France and then emerging victorious 5-4 in the shootout. Bayern Munich winger Michael Olise was largely responsible for the Gallic recovery in Paris, opening the scoring with a memorable free-kick and then providing the assist for the in-form Ousmane Dembele to fire home.

Portugal took a roundabout route to a semi-final spot too, forced to dig deep to beat Denmark 5-3 on aggregate. One-nil to the good after the first leg in Copenhagen, the Danes arguably deserved to bring a larger cushion to the return in Lisbon – and ultimately would come to regret that lack of killer instinct. As brave and purposeful as they were in the return – scoring twice in regulation play through Rasmus Kristensen and Christian Eriksen to force an additional 30 minutes – the Portuguese simply were not to be denied in extra-time, substitute Francisco Trincao adding his second goal of the night and Goncalo Ramos wrapping things up.

Yet another night of highs and lows for Cristiano Ronaldo, who had a weak penalty saved early on by Kasper Schmeichel, but did at least etch his name on the scoresheet, on hand to slot home from a tight angle after

Semi-finalists... European champions Spain celebrate after seeing off the Dutch 5-4 on penalties

> The Netherlands-Spain clash, which the Iberians eventually won 5-4 on penalties, was typical of the thrilling fare on the menu

Tense quarter-final...Germany and Italy players square up in Dortmund

Schmeichel had pushed a Bruno Fernandes effort onto the post.

Germany, very impressive in coming from behind to beat Italy 2-1 in Milan in their quarter-final first leg, suffered an outbreak of over-confidence in the second game of this *Clash of the Titans* double-header. Near enough perfect in everything they attempted in the first half in Dortmund, Julian Nagelsmann's side were 3-0 up at half-time, only to allow the *Azzurri* to turn the tables, restoring parity at 3-3 thanks to a Moise Kean brace and Giacomo Raspadori penalty five minutes into stoppage-time.

"We had too much free-styling without reason," lamented Nagelsmann in his post-match press conference.

The Final Four event will take place in Germany in June, with the hosts facing Portugal in Munich, and Spain and France going head-to-head in the other semi-final in Stuttgart. Only in the event of a home triumph will there be a new name etched onto the trophy, with Portugal (2019), France (2021) and Spain (2023) having won the previous editions.

Staying in League A ...Romelu Lukaku scores for Belgium against Ukraine

Comebacks also were a major theme in the League A/B relegation/promotion play-offs. Greece, who lost 1-0 at home to Scotland in the first leg in Piraeus, proved irresistible in the Glasgow return, winning 3-0 at a canter and securing an upgrade to the Nations League top tier. A similar story took place in Belgium, where the *Diables Rouges* reacted to an embarrassing 3-1 loss to Ukraine by winning the return 3-0 in Genk, a face-saving operation which keeps Rudi Garcia's team in League A. Turkey hammered Hungary 6-1 on aggregate to replace the Magyars at the A level, while Serbia defeated Austria 3-1 on aggregate to maintain their top-section status.

In the League B/C play-offs, Georgia, Republic of Ireland and Slovenia saw off Armenia, Bulgaria and Slovakia respectively, thus retaining the right to compete in League B. Meanwhile Kosovo, triumphant home and away against Iceland, will take the place of the latter in the second section.

Nick Bidwell

EUROPE SETS OUT ON ROAD TO NORTH AMERICA

Solid start...Wales players celebrate during their victory over Kazakhstan

As expected, Thomas Tuchel's reign as England manager began with two comfortable home wins over Albania (2-0) and Latvia (3-0) in World Cup qualifying Group K, a pair of Three Lions displays best described as solid rather than spectacular. The main positives were three players scoring their first international goals: debutant left-back Myles Lewis-Skelly v Albania, Reece James with a brilliant free-kick against Latvia, and Eberechi Eze in the same match.

Wales and North Macedonia are setting the pace in Group J with four points from a possible six. Wales, undefeated in eight games since Craig Bellamy took over as boss, clearly are a side on the up, though they do remain a work in progress. Their display in a 3-1 home win v Kazakhstan was unconvincing at times and they came very close to defeat in North Macedonia, requiring a last-gasp equaliser from David Brooks to spare their blushes.

Bosnia & Herzegovina, who have only appeared in one previous World Cup – in 2014 – have made an exceedingly strong start in Group H, laying down a marker with a morale-boosting 1-0 win in Romania and 2-1 home victory against Cyprus. Bosnian fans have tended to be critical of coach Sergej Barbarez, but even the most committed naysayers are now starting to pipe down. Romania, who have high hopes of making their first World Cup appearance since 1998, bounced back with a 5-1 win against San Marino but, with group favourites Austria set to enter the fray in June with a clash at home against the Romanians, Mircea Lucescu's side now find themselves on the back foot.

Despite picking up maximum points from their first two Group G matches, claiming home victories over Lithuania (1-0) and Malta (2-0), Poland continue to flatter to deceive. Star striker Robert Lewandowski, their match winner against Lithuania, needs better service and as far as public opinion is concerned, head coach Michal Probierz very much remains under the spotlight.

Also aiming to compete in their first World Cup since France '98, Norway gave the impression of a team on a mission as they swung into high gear with a 5-0 victory in Moldova and a vital 4-2 Group I win over Israel (held in Debrecen, Hungary). Their biggest stars shone brightly: Erling Haaland provided end product in both games, and Martin Odegaard was a most deserving Man of the Match v Israel. The Norwegians' next match, at home to Italy, will likely prove a crucial indicator as to who tops the group.

In Group L, Montenegro and the Czech Republic sit atop the standings with six points each. Montenegro did have a scare in their 1-0 home win over the Faroe Islands, only breaking the deadlock on 96 minutes through midfielder Edvin Kuc, while the Czechs also made hard work of seeing off the Faroes, needing an 85th-minute Patrik Schick strike to seal a 2-1 home win.

The five-team groups (Groups G to L) continue in June, with the Netherlands (Group G), Austria (Group H), Italy (Group I), Belgium (Group J), Serbia (Group K) and Croatia (Group L) entering the World Cup qualifying race. Groups A to F, which consist of four-team groups and include UEFA Nations League finalists Germany, Spain, France and Portugal, commence in September.

Nick Bidwell

TOP SIX PULL CLEAR

Rounds 13 and 14 in South America's World Cup qualifiers reinforced the outcome of the action towards the end of last year, when the six teams chasing an automatic place in 2026 broke away from the rest.

But the games in March also exposed differences between the six as they start to build towards North America.

Argentina had already booked their World Cup place before they were able to celebrate in style, demolishing Brazil 4-1 in Buenos Aires. They shrugged off the absence of Lionel Messi (and Lautaro Martinez) with triumphs over both their traditional rivals – four days earlier they'd won 1-0 away to Uruguay. The emergence of playmaker Thiago Almada was a big plus, and though there are concerns about the lack of renewal of the defensive unit, coach Lionel Scaloni says that he will use the rest of the campaign to look at options. Eight points clear at the top of the table, he can certainly experiment from a position of strength.

> For Brazil, the game in Buenos Aires was 90 minutes of unrelenting humiliation – a defeat, in its way, as painful as the 7-1 to Germany in 2014

For Brazil, though, the game in Buenos Aires was 90 minutes of unrelenting humiliation – a defeat, in its way, as painful as the 7-1 to Germany in 2014. In other recent games only flashes of individual talent has been keeping the team afloat. A Vinicius Junior special a few days earlier secured a 2-1 win at home to Colombia that their laboured display hardly deserved. The recall of Neymar – aborted because of a muscular injury – came across as a panic move from a coach who looks out of his depth. They look desperately disjointed, and Dorival Junior will be lucky to survive.

Far happier are Ecuador and Paraguay, second and fifth respectively, who both won at home and drew away in March. The Ecuadorians boast a splendid defensive unit – they have let in just five goals in 14 games – but the dependence for goals on the veteran Enner Valencia is a concern.

Paraguay have been the region's form side since Gustavo Alfaro took over coaching duties after the Copa America. No team has picked up more points in the subsequent eight rounds, and after winning at home to Chile the team showed its quality and resilience by once again coming from behind to draw away to difficult opponents – this time Colombia. From being out of contention a year ago, Paraguay are now well on course for their first World Cup appearance since 2010.

Colombia should be fine after missing out on Qatar, but they have run into problems. They were the last unbeaten team left standing, but the last six rounds have brought just one win and four defeats. It is not proving easy for manager Nestor Lorenzo to balance a side with James Rodriguez and two strikers.

Uruguay's Marcelo Bielsa is left scratching his head after another two goalless rounds – although the draw away to Bolivia was a good result. So full of attacking potency in 2023,

In-form side ...Paraguay are eyeing their first World Cup since South Africa 2010

Humiliation... Brazil's Vinicius Junior watches on as Argentina players celebrate

Bielsa's team are now struggling to click, and the four remaining rounds in June and September will be important as he strives to get the blend back.

But the main thing at stake in the final stretch is the play-off place, for the team that finishes seventh. Venezuela currently hold that position after beating Peru 1-0 – their first victory in ten games. They lead Bolivia by a point, which will become four if they beat the Bolivians in the next round in June. It is a must-win match. True, Bolivia have been held in their last two home games, but the extreme altitude of El Alto, even higher than La Paz, always makes them favourites to pick up points at home.

The bottom two teams, Peru and Chile, will be hoping for a draw between Venezuela and Bolivia, which would give them the chance to get back in contention. Peru, on their third coach, have been extremely poor. They doubled their goal haul for the entire campaign when they beat Bolivia 3-1, and barely deserve a shot at the play-off slot. Chile, meanwhile, have been showing signs of progress. It looks as if coach Ricardo Gareca has finally found his team, but with tough fixtures ahead, it has almost certainly come too late to take Chile to the World Cup.

Tim Vickery

KIWIS BOOK WORLD CUP BERTH

Qualification secured...New Zealand players celebrate

As expected, New Zealand cruised to World Cup 2026 qualification, becoming the second non-host nation to book their ticket.

The All Whites made short work of Fiji in the OFC qualification semi-final, thrashing a side clearly missing talisman Roy Krishna, sidelined due to an ACL injury, 7-0. Fiji had been foiled in their attempt to bolster the ranks with some professional players from Australia and Europe, so hopes were low ahead of the match, but the ease with which New Zealand progressed was still a surprise.

The game was over as a contest by the 23rd minute in Wellington when New Zealand went 3-0 up. Nottingham Forest striker Chris Wood subsequently netted a hat-trick of headers and, after being substituted off, went into the stands still in match kit to sign autographs and take photographs with fans, earning him an unusual yellow card.

In the other semi-final, New Caledonia overcame Tahiti 3-0 in the battle of the French overseas territories. The pick of the goals was a long-range strike from Georges Gope-Fenepej, the Kagus's star man, which formed part of his decisive brace. Gope-Fenepej, like several of his team-mates, plays his football in French football's fourth tier, strengthening the backbone of a largely domestic squad.

Reaching the decider with New Zealand was a significant achievement for New Caledonia who had to pull out of the 2024 OFC Nations Cup due to social unrest in the country, leading to a state of emergency being declared.

The clash between New Zealand and New Caledonia at Auckland's Eden Park in front of a crowd of over 25,000 was dubbed "the biggest game in OFC history" as it was the first time an automatic World Cup qualification spot was at stake in a match played between two sides from Oceania.

Despite the odds being overwhelmingly in their favour, New Zealand were thwarted by a spirited and well-organised New Caledonia side and went into the break still goalless.

When Chris Wood limped off with a thigh injury just after the interval the home fans must have feared a shock, but instead New Zealand struck through Michael Boxall's timely first international goal. The tension eased and Wood's replacement, Kosta Barbarouses, doubled the lead soon after. Elijah Just added some gloss to the scoreline in the 80th minute as New Caledonia visibly flagged.

"It's not great for us losing our captain and our goalscorer," said New Zealand's English coach Darren Bazeley. "It was a difficult thing for the team, but they came through so well."

For New Zealand it secures a first World Cup since 2010 – a finals they remained unbeaten in, exiting at the group stage with three draws – and emphatically so with 29 goals scored and just one conceded through their qualification campaign.

New Caledonia still have some hope of getting to their first World Cup via the inter-confederation play-offs next year, but it is a daunting route with many strong sides potentially needing that last-chance saloon. The representatives from Africa, Asia, CONCACAF and South America will all be hoping to be drawn against the Oceania minnows. Much will depend on how they prepare for the challenge and some rare friendly games against teams from other confederations could prove especially important.

Paul Watson

FOUR TEAMS ON THE VERGE OF QUALIFYING

Race on...South Africa's Relebohile Mofokeng fights for the ball with Benin defender Abdoul Rachid Moumini

Ghana's bid for redemption after their shock failure to reach the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations took a big step forward as the results of their two 2026 World Cup qualifiers in March solidified their place at the top of their qualifying group.

There are nine groups in the African section with only the winners advancing to the finals, while the four best-placed runners-up enter the newly expanded play-off process where there is a possibility of one more place.

Ghana did not win any of their six AFCON qualifiers between September and November last year but kept Otto Addo on as coach, and that faith was repaid. He was delighted as they beat Chad 5-0 at home and then won 3-0 away against Madagascar with Arsenal's Thomas Partey crucial in both games.

Those results opened up a three-point lead in Group I over Comoros, who lost 3-0 to Mali. The threat from the latter, though, was negated by their shock 0-0 draw with the Central African Republic. Still, the Malians will be tough opponents for Ghana when the qualifiers resume in September and there is still some way to go in the group.

Elsewhere, it is likely that Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt will confirm their places in the North American tournament. South Africa also have a healthy lead in their group but face the prospect of potentially losing points from their 2-0 victory over Lesotho. Midfielder Teboho Mokoena played in the game despite the fact that he'd picked up two yellow cards in previous qualifiers against Benin and Zimbabwe, meaning, according to FIFA rules, he should have been suspended.

It was exceedingly embarrassing for the South African Football Association and its team management and they now anxiously await a decision from FIFA. They do have some wiggle room, though, after Nigeria dropped points at home to Zimbabwe as Huddersfield Town loanee Tawanda Chirewa dribbled through the Super Eagles' defence for a stoppage-time equaliser in a 1-1 draw.

If South Africa do lose the Lesotho points, they will still be three ahead of Nigeria, whose January decision to appoint ex-Mali international full-back and coach Eric Chelle raised eyebrows.

If there is to be a fairy-tale story in these qualifiers it could be the small archipelago of the Cape Verde Islands, who have a single-point lead over Cameroon in Group D. Cape Verde have embarrassed the Indomitable Lions in the past, notably in qualifying for the 2013 AFCON, and will be at home to Cameroon in a key clash in September. Like Ghana, Cape Verde failed to qualify for the 2025 Cup of Nations finals, but have bounced back and their 2-1 win in Luanda over Angola was a significant result that killed off home hopes.

Cameroon also dropped points in a shock draw with Eswatini. The game was played in South Africa as the tiny kingdom is one of the countries unable to play at home because their facilities are not up to scratch. It was a listless performance from a strong side, with Premier League stars Andre Onana and Bryan Mbeumo in the line-up, but not surprising as Cameroon had only arrived at their hotel in the South African city of Nelspruit at around 3am ahead of a 6pm local time kick-off.

> It is likely that Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt will confirm their places in the North American tournament

They had planned to fly by charter from Cameroon to Nelspruit but because their charter left late, for which no reason was given, they were unable to land at Nelspruit's airport, which had closed for the night. Instead, the squad landed in Johannesburg, waited some three hours at the airport to secure a bus, and then spent five hours on the road to Nelspruit.

In Group B, September's clash in Kinshasa between DR Congo and Senegal should be the decisive tie in the group after the Leopards won two in a row to go one point above Senegal, who dropped points against Sudan. They have 13 points to 12 for an injury-plagued Senegal, with Sudan also on 12, having drawn twice in March and losing their early initiative in the group.

African champions Ivory Coast have a one-point lead in Group F over Gabon after unconvincing 1-0 wins over Burundi and Gambia. With talisman Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang leading their attack, Gabon easily beat Seychelles at home and then got a good result in Nairobi against Kenya, who had only weeks earlier appointed the former South Africa international Benni McCarthy as their new coach.

Group E was already down to five teams from the original six after Eritrea withdrew before the qualifiers began and has been further ravaged by the FIFA suspension of Congo, who have been banned from world competition because of government interference in the running of their football federation. It means there were only two matches played over the latest window, both won by Morocco to ensure they are the only country with a 100 per cent record in the qualifiers.

Mark Gleeson

Hot on Ivory Coast's heels...Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang is leading Gabon's challenge

JAPAN AND IRAN TOP OF THE CLASS IN ASIA

Heading to North America...Iran stars Omid Noorafkan and Saman Ghoddos celebrate qualification

It was fitting that Japan and Iran were the first two teams from Asia to qualify for the 2026 World Cup, as they are probably the two best teams that the continent has to offer. Japan are certainly number one and qualified before anyone else with three games remaining on March 20. Five days later, Iran joined them with two matches to spare.

The Japanese celebrations on the pitch at the Saitama Stadium after the 2-0 win over Bahrain were more muted than in the past. This is partly due to the fact that it had been coming for months, but also because this means an eighth successive finals appearance. As captain Wataru Endo told fans, Japan need to think more about going far at the World Cup rather than just making up the numbers.

After all, getting there is easier. Asia now has eight automatic spots at the 48-team tournament, up from four in 2022. Six go to those that finish in the top two of the three groups. Teams that end up in third and fourth will advance to a further stage to fight it out for the other two.

While Japan had Group C sewn up a long time ago, heading into the March window only one point separated the other five teams in the group. After the latest two games, however, the fight for second is looking a little clearer.

Australia had a good few days, thrashing Indonesia 5-1 to give Team Garuda's new manager Patrick Kluivert a rough welcome to Asian football and then going to China to win 2-0. The Socceroos are second, three points clear of third-placed Saudi Arabia who beat the Chinese and then went to Japan to scrap for a 0-0 draw. Indonesia bounced back to beat Bahrain 1-0 and are in fourth, a point behind the Saudis. China and Bahrain are now out of the running for the automatic spots and almost out of the running full stop.

In Group A, Iran's path was almost as smooth as Japan's, although they needed two goals from Inter striker Mehdi Taremi to come back twice against Uzbekistan to draw 2-2 at home and secure a fourth successive World Cup place. The Central Asian visitors would have made it for the first time with a win in Tehran but now have to wait. There will be some nerves in Tashkent, especially as they have thrown good qualification opportunities away in the past.

> As captain Wataru Endo told fans, Japan need to think more about going far at the World Cup rather than just making up the numbers

Eyes on the prize ...Japan captain Wataru Endo

Still, they are four points clear in second above the United Arab Emirates. The UAE needed a 98th-minute goal to see off North Korea 2-1 and while the result was not a surprise, the almost immediate dismissal of former Portugal and South Korea boss Paulo Bento as head coach was.

At least the UAE are still in the running, just, for second. 2022 World Cup hosts Qatar now have to focus on the longer route if they are to qualify. A 3-1 defeat in Kyrgyzstan summed up a very inconsistent third-round showing from the Asian champions.

In Group B, South Korea expected to beat Oman and Jordan at home to qualify for an 11th successive World Cup finals, but instead drew 1-1 in both to make it six points dropped in the last three games.

The Taegeuk Warriors are still top of the group with 16 points, three above Jordan. Both are lucky that Iraq only have 12. The Lions of Mesopotamia had a disastrous window. Had they taken, as expected, six points against Kuwait and Palestine then they would now be top. Instead, they needed two stoppage-time goals against Kuwait to salvage a draw and then suffered the same fate themselves against Palestine. With two minutes remaining, Iraq ended up losing 2-1 to give life to Palestine's slim World Cup hopes.

John Duerden

POLAND

League FOCUS

Emerging power... Jagiellonia Bialystok won last season's Polish title and are flying in Europe this season

2024-25 TEAMS

- Cracovia
- GKS Katowice
- Gornik Zabrze
- Jagiellonia Bialystok
- Korona Kielce
- Lech Poznan
- Lechia Gdansk
- Legia Warsaw
- Motor Lublin
- Piast Gliwice
- Pogon Szczecin
- Puszcza Niepolomice
- Radomiak Radom
- Rakow Czestochowa
- Slask Wroclaw
- Stal Mielec
- Widzew Lodz
- Zaglebie Lubin

EKSTRAKLASA – A BRIEF HISTORY

With a national league first founded in 1927, Poland is approaching the 100th anniversary of top-flight football in the country. Unlike other leagues across Europe, the Ekstraklasa title has been divided fairly equally among a number of clubs; in the last six years, there have been five different winners, including three first-time champions – Jagiellonia Bialystok, Rakow Czestochowa and Piast Gliwice.

THE FORMAT

These days, the format of the Ekstraklasa is straightforward: 18 clubs play each other home and away, with the top team named champions and the bottom three relegated. This is the fourth season since the number of teams was increased from 16, and the fifth since the previous format of splitting the league in half (into championship and relegation rounds) for the final seven games was ditched.

HONOURS BOARD

Club	*Title wins*	*Runners-up*	*Last title*
Legia Warsaw	15	14	2020-21
Wisla Krakow	14	13	2010-11
Gornik Zabrze	14	4	1987-88
Ruch Chorzow	13	6	1988-89
Lech Poznan	8	3	2021-22
Cracovia	5	2	1948

With two Polish clubs making it to the quarter-finals of this season's Conference League, how strong is the Ekstraklasa?
The performances of Jagiellonia Bialystok and Legia Warsaw in Europe this campaign means that Poland will have five clubs competing in European competition in 2026-27, including two in the Champions League qualifiers.

If the Ekstraklasa is to stay there, the money coming in from UEFA must be well spent on a higher quality of foreign players than it has been in the past. To date, the league's most expensive foreign signing is Portuguese left-back Ruben Vinagre, for whom Legia paid Sporting £2.1 million in February, and the early signs are promising.

There is no reason that Poland shouldn't be an attractive destination with modern stadiums, good attendance figures (an average of 12,303 per league game in the 2023-24 season), electric atmospheres in the stands and high-quality television broadcasts. The goal now should be to maintain equally high standards on the pitch.

Which clubs are the dominant forces of Polish football at the moment?
The richest clubs with the largest fanbases in the country – Legia Warsaw and Lech Poznan – begin each season with their targets set on the title. But Legia's chances are now remote, while Lech will have to fight against two of the emerging powers of Polish football.

Rakow Czestochowa were league champions two years ago, building a title-winning side thanks to owner Michal Swierczewski, a businessman from the computer industry. After winning the title as coach, Marek Papszun took a year off before returning to the club this season, and his team are once again candidates to be champions.

Jagiellonia, the defending champions, owe their first-ever Polish title to the work of former chairman Wojciech Pertkiewicz, sports director Lukasz Maslowski and coach Adrian Siemieniec. Pertkiewicz got the club out of serious debt, Maslowski built a team on a shoestring budget and Siemieniec led them to the title. Importantly, Jagiellonia are playing just as well as they did last season, despite still having a more modest budget compared with their main rivals.

Who are the young, fashionable coaches in Poland right now?
Siemieniec was only 32 when he won the title with Jagiellonia last season, leading a number of interesting young coaches in the Ekstraklasa. Mateusz Stolarski (Motor Lublin, 32) and Dawid Kroczek (Cracovia, 35) attract attention, but not as much as Legia's Goncalo Feio.

The 35-year-old Portuguese first arrived in Poland in 2010 as an exchange student and worked behind the scenes at a number of clubs before his first senior role with Motor Lublin. He led the club to promotion from the third tier, but left under a cloud following an explosive row after a game.

That short-tempered reputation has followed him. No coach has been booked more often in Poland this season, while having previously served as assistant coach to Papszun and Stolarski, Feio now says he has "no relations" with them. Nonetheless, his sterling work guiding Legia to the Conference League quarter-finals and a showpiece tie with Chelsea will not have gone unnoticed.

In stark contrast, Siemieniec, whose Jagiellonia side face an equally glamorous European encounter against Real Betis, is a model of good manners. The title winner says: "It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice."

Can one of Poland's giants return to Ekstraklasa?
Three teams will come up from the second division, two automatically and one via the play-offs. This season, no fewer than four former Polish champions are bidding to return: Polonia Warsaw, LKS Lodz, Wisla Krakow and Ruch Chorzow.

Returning to the top flight is especially important for the latter two, who have won 27 titles between them. Ruch went down last year, but Wisla – sensational winners of the 2024 Polish Cup – are hoping it can be third time lucky having twice missed out on promotion. The club managed to save itself from bankruptcy, but returning to the highest level is crucial to improving their financial situation.

Wisla and Ruch fans have been friendly towards each other for years, with their meeting in February attracting a 21st century record attendance of 53,293.

Dariusz Kurowski

ONE TO WATCH

Afimico PULULU

(Jagiellonia Bialystok)

The 26-year-old Angolan forward grew up in France before being recruited into the academy of Basel. After a loan at Neuchatel Xamax and a spell with Greuther Furth in Germany, he joined Jagiellonia in 2023 and has enjoyed the best form of his career. His combination of immense physicality and neat footwork makes him a real handful for defenders, as he proved last season in Jagiellonia's title success. Ahead of the Conference League quarter-finals, he was the tournament's top scorer with eight goals, which will have caught the attention of clubs across Europe. According to local media reports, he is available this summer for as little as £4 million.

Conference League quarter-finalists ...Legia Warsaw

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SUBLIME COTE D'IVOIRE

Summer signing... Cornelius unveiled as a Marseille player last August

Tough defender... Cornelius crunches into a tackle with Lyon's Rayan Cherki

difference. I'm happy to be playing under him and to be learning from him every day. I hope we can have a lot of success together.

Marseille is famous for having some of the most passionate and noisy fans in the world. What has been your experience of the Stade Velodrome so far?
Firstly, it's a real privilege because all footballers started playing because we were fans of the game and because we had that same passion, so it is definitely a privilege to now play in front of a fanbase and fans like that at the Velodrome. But with that privilege comes pressure as well. They have expectations of how we perform when we wear the Olympique Marseille jersey, and especially when we perform at home there are certain standards they expect. There are two sides to the coin, but it's exciting and it pushes us to always strive to do our best every day.

It's a club and a fanbase that's very proud of its history and they expect anyone who signs for Marseille to respect that history and do their best to leave their image on the club in a positive way. You feel that and it also makes you realise how big a club it is and how lucky we are to be playing for Marseille.

There are now five Canadians playing in Ligue 1 and two of them – you and Ismael Kone – are at Marseille. What does that say about the level of Canadian football?
It's nice that Canadians are starting to get more exposure in top leagues like Ligue 1. For me

Shirt swap...Cornelius was part of the Canada side that lost to Argentina in last year's Copa America semi-finals

and Ismael, it's even more of a blessing because we both signed at the same time in Marseille. We both had to go through the same adjustments after changing countries so it's nice to have a familiar face going through that with you. Now that we are settled at Marseille, we try to push each other every day so it's definitely a help to have a fellow Canadian here.

We all have very good relationships in the national team, so sometimes we like to unwind together in the evenings and just hang out and talk about how things are going.

Jonathan David is the most high-profile Canadian in Ligue 1 and is right up there in this season's scoring charts. Has it surprised you how quickly his reputation has grown?
Honestly, no, because we've been playing together for so long and you can see the talent that was there from a young age. He has so many great attributes but above all I would pick out his intelligence. He's a player that reads the game very, very well. He analyses the game the entire time and really knows what's going on. Then, like any top striker, when he gets the opportunities he normally finishes. He's a great player with a lot of qualities – but I'm also confident that we know what to do in order to shut him down when Marseille play Lille!

2024 was a big year for you with the Canada national team as you played 11 times. How does it feel to be involved regularly again?
It's great. Every time I go to Canada, I always try to do my best no matter what role I'm given. In the past, sometimes the role was coming off the bench. Recently, it's been more so in the starting line-up. Either way, I think the most important thing when you're representing your country is that you're a good team-mate. It was a good year in 2024. The team did well, we performed well. Now we have to flip the page and look forward to what's coming up in 2025 and, of course, 2026.

> "We're trying to show Canadians that there's more choice than just playing ice hockey. We want them to believe that they can be the next Alphonso Davies or Jonathan David"

You were agonisingly close to a spot in the 2024 Copa America final, losing your semi-final 2-0 to Argentina. How important was that tournament in demonstrating Canada's progress?
I think for Canada and the group we have, it's been our goal for a while. We've all felt that we can compete against the best teams in the world and for whatever reason it didn't quite pan out the way we wanted it to. But I think the Copa America was a real turning point where we were actually able to show the world that we can compete at the highest level and that we do have players of high quality. It's something that as a group we are proud of, but now the difference is to do it consistently; we need to keep those standards high and continue going in that upward direction.

What has been the key to this recent emergence of Canada as a footballing power? Was it planned or just good fortune with the group of talented players you have right now?
I think it is maybe a bit of both. Canada has obviously been trying to grow the game at the grassroots level because it is hosting the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Maybe the group we have now has been a reward for what the federation has been trying to do for the past ten, 15 years. There is an element of good fortune because all of us players went on different paths but have come together at the same time.

Historically, Canada has always been a hockey country and we're trying to show Canadians that there's more choice than just playing ice hockey. We want them to believe that they can be the next Alphonso Davies or Jonathan David.

What would it mean for you to play in next year's World Cup on home soil?
My first experience at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar made me see how the whole world really stops and all eyes are on the tournament. It just makes 2026 more exciting because now it's another World Cup but this time in my own country. It is just special to think about. But I know that a lot can happen in football and I know the best way for me to get to that World Cup in the best form is to just focus on each day and each game.

Interview by Mark Lomas

World Service

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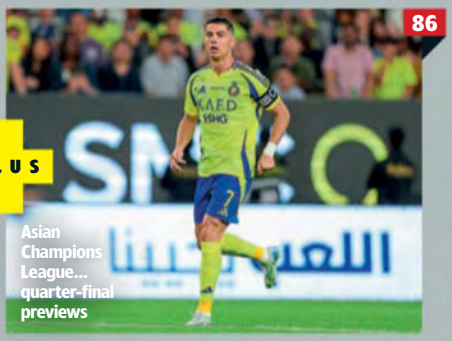

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Copa Libertadores...a look ahead to the 2025 campaign

South America

TIM VICKERY

Preview

Taking on the Brazilian big guns

Can anyone stop the Copa Libertadores trophy from heading to Brazil for the seventh straight year?

With six consecutive Brazilian winners, four of which came in all-Brazilian finals, Brazil's domination of the Copa Libertadores is almost total.

The growing financial gap to the rest of the continent, plus the fact that they have seven teams in this season's competition (Argentina has six clubs in the field of 32, everyone else has two or three), means that the 2025 title is almost certain to stay in Brazil. But there are reasons to believe that the playing field might be more level this year.

One reason is the Club World Cup, which creates an extra challenge for reigning champions Botafogo, plus Flamengo and Palmeiras, the big hitters over the past few years. While the others are resting, the big three Brazilians will be playing a competitive tournament in the USA's summer heat. In an already over-cluttered calendar, it won't be easy for them to sustain their efforts on all fronts.

Another reason is that this looks like a strong Libertadores field, with possible obstacles to Brazilian domination scattered around a number of different countries.

The obvious place to look is Argentina, the only other nation to have supplied finalists since the switch to a year-long format in 2017. Boca Juniors may have fallen in the qualifying rounds, but River Plate, the last non-Brazilian champions, are back. But they, too, are in the Club World Cup, and the second coming of coach Marcelo Gallardo has struggled to live up to expectations.

But there is Racing, under the ultra-competitive Gustavo Costas,

who overcame a horde of Brazilians to win last year's Sudamericana, and swept aside Botafogo home and away in February to take the Recopa. Estudiantes under Eduardo Dominguez are looking increasingly dangerous, and Talleres of Cordoba, backed by big home crowds, are rapidly establishing themselves as a serious force.

Last year's surprise side were Penarol of Uruguay, who eliminated Flamengo on their way to the semi-finals. Instead of basing their team on promising youngsters, quickly sold, Diego Aguirre's Penarol were a canny unit of experienced names. Can they keep the momentum going this year? And might their achievement serve as inspiration for historic local rivals Nacional?

Last year was a very disappointing Libertadores for both Ecuador and Paraguay, two countries who in recent years had been punching well above their weight. There are genuine hopes of getting back on track in 2025. Paraguay's Cerro Porteno blazed their way through the qualifying rounds in style, and are now joined in the group stage by three-time winners Olimpia, the reigning domestic champions, and by Libertad, who have become a 21st century force.

Barcelona of Ecuador, meanwhile, took the considerable scalp of Brazil's Corinthians in the qualifying rounds and, with the memory of two recent semi-final appearances still strong, the Guayaquil club are aiming high as they go into the group phase. They are in the same group as compatriots Independiente del Valle, feared both for the altitude of Quito and the excellence of their youth development work. Also in the field are neighbours LDU (or Liga de Quito), who may be Ecuador's best bet. Champions in 2008, and Sudamericana winners in 2023, LDU have been drawn into a relatively straightforward group and will be hoping to progress deep into the competition.

Colombia's Atletico Nacional were the last team to win under the old format in 2016, when the action was squeezed into the first half of the year, but Colombian teams have proved a massive disappointment since then. There are hopes that the current Atletico Nacional side is the best in almost a decade, although they will have to fight their way out of what, on paper at least, looks like the toughest of the eight groups.

This looks like a strong Libertadores field, with possible obstacles to Brazilian domination scattered around a number of different countries

They are in with Nacional of Uruguay, plus two Brazilians – Internacional (it is a confusing group for names) and Bahia, who came through qualifying. There will be plenty of spotlight on these teams. Roger Machado's Internacional ended last year on a roll, while Rogerio Ceni's Bahia are in the competition for the first time in 36 years. Back in 1960, they were the first Brazilian team to compete and, now part of the City Football Group, they hope to become a continental power.

Two teams from Brazil's northeast take part this year, with Juan Pablo Vojvoda's Fortaleza continuing their extraordinary journey. Another Argentine coach in Brazil, Sao Paulo's Luis Zubeldia, is on record as declaring that his team will lift the trophy on November 29. First, they must get out of a difficult group featuring Libertad, Talleres and Peru's Alianza Lima, conquerors of Boca Juniors. But Sao Paulo have a special relationship with the competition after their triumphs in the 1990s, and Zubeldia trusts in the experience of Oscar and Lucas Moura to help them become the first Brazilian club to win the title four times.

This puts them in a race with Flamengo and Palmeiras, both also with three titles to their name. Botafogo go into the competition as unknown quantities after losing key players, appointing a new coach in Renato Paiva and effectively discarding the first three months of the year. Abel Ferreira's Palmeiras have re-enforced, most notably making centre-forward Vitor Roque the most expensive signing in Brazilian history. But they will lose winger Estevao to Chelsea in the middle of the year. And with the young coach marshalling his considerable resources with impressive skill, the Flamengo of Filipe Luis are probably the team to beat – but much will depend on how they can balance the Libertadores with the Club World Cup.

Turn over for the group-stage draw.

Argentina's best hope?...Racing Club defeated Botafogo 4-0 on aggregate in February's Recopa, CONMEBOL's Super Cup

Flamengo coach... Filipe Luis will also have to juggle the Club World Cup

Back at Sao Paulo...Brazilian midfielder Oscar

South America

TIM VICKERY

Sudamericana wide open

The format of South America's second-tier club competition makes a favourite impossible to pick at this stage, though Brazilian clubs are likely to lead the way

The eventual winners of the 2025 Copa Sudamericana may not even be present in the draw for the group phase.

That is because in July the field is augmented by eight teams from the Libertadores – those who finish third in their groups – who will play-off against the Sudamericana group runners-up for a place in the last 16. In 2020 and 2022 the trophy ended up in the hands of teams who had fallen out of the Libertadores, and this, obviously, makes the Sudamericana difficult to predict at this stage.

One general consideration can be made. While the Libertadores is held in a Brazilian grip, the Sudamericana has given the rest of the continent a chance. Since the current format was introduced in 2017, Athletico Paranaense are the only Brazilian

Sudamericana contenders... Fluminense and Atletico Mineiro met in the Libertadores quarter-finals last season

winners of the Sudamericana, with the title otherwise shared between Argentina and Ecuador.

The difference this year is the relative strength of the Brazilian contingent. While the big hitters from the rest of the continent are almost all in the Libertadores (until July at least), Brazil has six teams who have already been crowned continental champions: Atletico Mineiro (also Libertadores runners-up in 2024), Corinthians, Cruzeiro, Fluminense, Gremio and Vasco da Gama.

The only other former Libertadores winners are Independiente of Argentina (record seven-time winners, in fact). Huracan, Lanus and Defensa y Justicia are all interesting contenders from Argentina – the latter two actually fought out the final of this competition back in 2020, with Defensa y Justicia coming out on top.

While the Copa Libertadores is held in a Brazilian grip, the Sudamericana has given the rest of the continent a chance

Elsewhere, the acquisition of Juan Fernando Quintero makes Colombia's America de Cali a fascinating watch, and there is a respectable Chilean contingent of Palestino, Union Espanola and Deportes Iquique. Ecuador has produced two previous winners, but Independiente del Valle and LDU are both in the Libertadores and neither Universidad Catolica nor Mushuc Runa look capable of going all the way.

Fascinating signing...Juan Fernando Quintero is back in Colombia with America de Cali

So, the Brazilians aside, this does not come across as a strong field. In the past, the Brazilian teams have not always given priority to the second-string continental competition, at least in the early stages. With only the group winners guaranteed a place in the round of 16, the Sudamericana requires focus right from the start. Teams cannot drift their way through the group stage.

This year, though, it should be easier for them to balance their international and domestic efforts. The league shuts down for a month for the Club World Cup, providing a welcome rest in the middle of the year, and this should work to the Brazilians' favour.

GROUP STAGE DRAWS

COPA SUDAMERICANA

GROUP A
- Independiente
- Guarani
- Nacional Potosi
- Boston River

GROUP B
- Defensa y Justicia
- Universidad Catolica
- Cerro Largo
- Vitoria

GROUP C
- America de Cali
- Huracan
- Racing
- Corinthians

GROUP D
- Gremio
- Godoy Cruz
- Sportivo Luqueno
- Atletico Grau

GROUP E
- Cruzeiro
- Palestino
- Union
- Mushuc Runa

GROUP F
- Fluminense
- Union Espanola
- Once Caldas
- GV San Jose

GROUP G
- Lanus
- Vasco da Gama
- Academia Puerto Cabello
- Melgar

GROUP H
- Atletico Mineiro
- Caracas
- Cienciano
- Deportes Iquique

COPA LIBERTADORES

GROUP A
- Botafogo
- Estudiantes
- Universidad de Chile
- Carabobo

GROUP B
- River Plate
- Independiente del Valle
- Universitario
- Barcelona

GROUP C
- Flamengo
- LDU Quito
- Deportivo Tachira
- Central Cordoba

GROUP D
- Sao Paulo
- Libertad
- Talleres
- Alianza Lima

GROUP E
- Racing
- Colo-Colo
- Fortaleza
- Atletico Bucaramanga

GROUP F
- Nacional
- Internacional
- Atletico Nacional
- Bahia

GROUP G
- Palmeiras
- Bolivar
- Sporting Cristal
- Cerro Porteno

GROUP H
- Penarol
- Olimpia
- Velez Sarsfield
- San Antonio Bulo Bulo

Saudi Arabia

JOHN DUERDEN

Saudis stand in the way

The three Saudi Arabian clubs will take some serious stopping – especially with home advantage – as the Asian Champions League Elite quarter-finals begin

Looking strong... Al Ahli swept aside Al Rayyan in the round of 16

The AFC Champions League Elite reaches the quarter-final stage on April 25 with the three Saudi Arabian teams still the ones to beat, even more so now that all the games from now until the May 3 final take place in their country.

Even if Al Hilal, Al Nassr and Al Ahli were set to face traditional home-and-away clashes, they would be favourites. But now, as the trio look forward to one-legged games in the city of Jeddah, an all-Saudi final is a distinct possibility.

The draw for the last eight, which brings together teams from the west and east in Asia for the first time, is unlikely to be causing too much stress.

Al Hilal will take on Gwangju FC. South Korean teams should never be underestimated – the K-League has 12 continental championship titles (Japan and Saudi Arabia are next with eight and six respectively) – but this is not just their first appearance in the quarter-finals but their first appearance in Asia's elite club competition at all.

Gwangju's squad is worth, according to estimates, around £7 million compared to Al Hilal's £150m. Still, they have the tournament's leading scorer with Jasir Asani on nine so far. The Albanian got

two in the dramatic comeback in the round of 16, scoring in the 118th minute of the second leg against Vissel Kobe of Japan to give Gwangju, who were two goals down from the first game, a 3-0 victory and a place in the last eight.

Al Hilal also came back from a first-leg deficit. Hopes of a fifth continental title were fading after the western zone league winners lost 1-0 in Uzbekistan to Pakhtakor, but a 4-0 victory back in Riyadh saw them through. The Blues, fighting tooth and nail with Al Ittihad for the league at home, are hoping to have Aleksandar Mitrovic back to link up once more with Ruben Neves and Salem Al Dawsari and are strong favourites.

In the semis, Al Ahli may well be waiting, with the Jeddah club also expected to progress against Thailand's Buriram United. Riyad Mahrez and Ivan Toney have been shining in Asia and Roberto Firmino is eligible to play in the Champions League (the Brazilian is not registered domestically after being replaced by Galeno from Porto), and also impressed in the 5-1 aggregate win over Al Rayyan of Qatar in the last 16. Ahli have never won the Asian title, but unlike Hilal are out of the domestic race and so can put all their eggs in their Champions League basket.

Buriram have lifted the last three Thai titles but, apart from reaching the last eight back in 2013, have not been this far before. It won't be easy to shock the expected 60,000 home fans in Jeddah, especially as this is not a free-scoring team. They ended the league phase with a goal difference of minus five and edged past Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim 1-0 over two legs in the last round.

Cristiano Ronaldo is still chasing his first piece of major silverware – though he did collect the Arab Club Champions Cup in 2023 – as his time in Saudi Arabia approaches two and a half years. With Al Nassr unlikely to win the Saudi Pro League, Asia looks his best bet. The 40-year-old missed the 0-0 draw with Esteghlal in Tehran but his strike in the second leg was sandwiched between two Jhon Duran goals in a 3-0 win. Coach Stefano Pioli may not yet have convinced fans that he is the man to bring the big prizes back to Riyadh, but a place in the last four is within reach.

That's even with Yokohama F. Marinos looking to be the toughest of the three opponents facing Saudi Arabian teams.

As the Saudi Arabian trio can look forward to one-legged games in the city of Jeddah, an all-Saudi final is a distinct possibility

Top scorer...Jasir Asani scored Gwangju's decisive goal in the stunning comeback win against Vissel Kobe

Trophy hunting ...Al Nassr's Cristiano Ronaldo

The five-time Japanese champions won the eastern group stage and were too good for Shanghai Port in the second round. In Asia, all seems to be going well under Steve Holland, Gareth Southgate's former England assistant, even if early season J. League form has been patchy. If this was a two-legged affair and Al Nassr had to play at Nissan Stadium then it could be very different, but a one-off clash in the late April heat by the Red Sea favours the hosts.

This leaves Al Sadd's clash with Kawasaki Frontale. The 17-time Qatari champions won the second of their Asian titles back in 2011 and finished fourth behind the Saudi trio in the league phase. With a healthy proportion of Qatari internationals and a talented group of African, European and South American imports, they were too strong for Al Wasl of the United Arab Emirates in the last 16. The same can be said for Kawasaki Frontale overcoming Shanghai Shenhua. It is about time that Kawasaki went far in Asia. After four Japanese titles in the past eight years, just one quarter-final appearance in the last eight attempts is not good enough.

To go all the way though, there are likely to be Saudi Arabian obstacles in the way.

QUARTER-FINAL DRAW

Al Hilal v Gwangju
Al Ahli v Buriram United
Yokohama F. Marinos v Al Nassr
Kawasaki Frontale v Al Sadd

Ivory Coast

MARK GLEESON

CAF secures a last-minute host for Under-20 AFCON

Familiar administrative problems overshadow youth tournament preparation

Senegal were the winners of the Under-17 Africa Cup of Nations two years ago and, with the majority of that squad still intact, they will be heavily fancied for success at this year's Under-20 Africa Cup of Nations finals, which are being hosted in nearby Ivory Coast from April 26 to May 18.

The Young Lions of Teranga are also the defending champions from the 2023 Under-20 Cup of Nations in Egypt, but that generation has now moved on. Still, the West African nation keeps churning out promising youth talent, in no small measure due to the multitude of youth academies dotted across the country, and the Under-17 champions of two years ago have moved up seamlessly to the older age category.

Serigne Saliou Dia has been appointed Senegal's new Under-20 head coach and will lead the defence of their title against Kenya, Sierra Leone and Zambia in Group C.

There are 13 competitors for the tournament, although only 12 were originally set to compete. Regional qualification tournaments were used, which is a change in how the preliminaries are conducted, having previously been two-legged home and away ties without any geographical restrictions.

Favourites... Senegal won the last edition in Egypt

Potential star... Ivory Coast and Hoffenheim winger Bazoumana Toure

Ivory Coast became the 13th team after agreeing to host the tournament, and demanding a slot for their side having been eliminated in the west zone preliminaries.

The Confederation of African Football (CAF) has a history of struggling to get countries to volunteer to host its junior tournaments because of the financial burden, and only secured Ivorian agreement in December – two months after the west zone's qualifiers were completed.

It does not paint too fine a picture of administrative competence, but the awkward number of teams could yet be solved by the case of Congo, who have qualified but since been suspended by FIFA.

They cannot compete unless their government restores the football federation that they have disbanded. But the impasse raged on through the World Cup qualifiers in March where Congo's games were cancelled, so there is little chance of the situation changing in time for their Under-20 team to play at the continental championship.

Congo are in the five-team Group A with the hosts, DR Congo, Ghana and Tanzania. There were plans to replace Congo with another team from their region through a play-off game between central zone semi-final losers Cameroon and the Central African Republic, but letting the participants fall back to a better manageable 12 is the other option being considered.

Group B is made up of Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa.

All but South Africa are past continental champions at Under-20 level with Nigeria's Flying Eagles being the most successful side with seven titles, albeit the last of them was a decade ago. They were also the best-performing African side at the 2023 Under-20 World Cup where they reached the quarter-finals.

> Ivory Coast became the 13th team after agreeing to host the tournament, and demanding a slot for their side

That means they will likely be formidable contenders once again, and coach Aliyu Zubair will be able to call upon many players based in Europe for his squad.

Morocco's squad is bristling with young talent from European clubs too, with head coach Mohamed Ouahabi benefitting from a very polished scouting system that Morocco have in the diaspora across Europe, quick to spot young talent with Moroccan connections and persuade them to declare their allegiance to the country.

Among their potential stars are striker Othmane Maama, who has scored in Ligue 1 for ailing Montpellier, and midfielders Naoufel El Hannach and Samir El Mourabet, both teenagers who have been on the bench for Paris Saint-Germain and Strasbourg respectively in French league action this season.

Egypt changed their Under-20 coach after securing qualification with Brazilian Rogerio Micale replaced by Osama Nabih, the former Zamalek coach and an assistant to Hector Cuper when he oversaw the senior Egypt side at the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

Home hopes have been placed on the shoulders of Younes Zerdouk, a young Frenchman who was assistant coach of the Comoros team that caused havoc at the 2021 Cup of Nations finals in Cameroon.

Among his potential Ivorian stars are winger Bazoumana Toure, who has already seen Bundesliga action with Hoffenheim this season, and midfielder Bala Keita, on Fiorentina's books.

The days when scouts from European clubs flocked to the African Youth Championship are mostly gone. By the time they reach the Under-20 level, the best prospects have already been snapped up. But often a gem or two has been missed, making the trip to the Ivory Coast one worth taking.

Flying Eagles...Nigeria reached the quarter-finals of the 2023 Under-20 World Cup in Argentina

Monaco

STEVE MENARY

Turning 50

Monaco's football scene celebrates a 50-year milestone this year, but faces an uncertain future

Challenge Prince Rainier III...action from last season's competition

With a population of 40,000 and less than a quarter holding a national passport, Monaco has never been a likely candidate to join UEFA. Alongside Vatican City, it is the only sovereign state in Europe without UEFA membership, with the Mediterranean principality represented by Ligue 1 side AS Monaco, eight-times champions of France.

Nevertheless, Monaco does also have a domestic competition: the Challenge Prince Rainier III, a corporate business league that will celebrate its 50th anniversary when the finals are staged at the Stade Louis II on May 6.

The origins of the competition lay in an annual game between staff from the Palace and the Palais de Justice. In 1975, Prince Rainier III asked for the game to be expanded to a competition for company employees across Monaco. Thirty years later, Prince Albert II acceded and has been a regular attendant at the annual finals.

Current holders Monte Carlo SBM, which employs more than 2,000 staff at the Fairmont resort, look set to retain their crown having gone through the first half of the season unbeaten. With 2023 winners MI Monaco languishing near the foot of the table, 2022 champions Carabiniers du Prince – made up of players from the prince's security detail – are the closest challengers.

Games are played fortnightly but only eight teams entered in 2024-25. The other contestants are Hospital, Mairie due Monaco, MOI, Surete Publique and Fonction Publique.

All eight have a decent chance of appearing at the Stade Louis II for the season's conclusion, a play-off featuring the top four sides. The bottom four also contest semi-finals with the winners fighting for the Trophee Ville de Monaco.

A team fielded by French construction giant VINCI won back in 2020 and were losing finalists in 2023 but are among a swathe of teams to disappear.

"In the past we have had 12, 14 or even 16 teams at 11-a-side, but we lost so many teams because of the economic problems and COVID-19," explains Christian Michelis, who made his debut as a player in the competition in 1976 and has been president for more than three decades. "Now teams have a one-in-two chance of playing at the stadium.

"There are a lot of small companies in Monaco now and that's why we play so much seven-a-side. Most of the company employees play in French clubs on a Sunday. I don't know if we will have eight teams at 11-a-side next year."

> "In the past we have had 12, 14 or even 16 teams at 11-a-side, but we lost so many teams because of the economic problems and COVID-19"
> Christian Michelis, Challenge Prince Rainier III president

A separate seven-a-side competition, the Prince Albert II, also kicked off in September alongside the 11-a-side competition with games once a fortnight and a bumper entry from companies including Monaco Telecom, bankers Edmond de Rothschild and Silversea Cruises.

The decline in 11-a-side football in Monaco appears to have affected the principality's amateur national team, which started in 2000 but has only managed one game in the last 11 years, drawing 0-0 in Rome against the Vatican City in 2017.

Thierry Petit, a croupier at the SBM casino, was a driving force behind the national side but now coaches Monte Carlo SBM, who remain favourites to lift a second successive Challenge Prince Rainier III title this season.

Dominant...Monte Carlo SBM won their 22nd title in last season's final

NEXT MONTH

Tournament previews

1
CONCACAF GOLD CUP

2
FIFA CLUB WORLD CUP

3
UEFA U21 EUROS

June issue on sale May 9

Internationals

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

AFRICA Section

● *9 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Group A

Mar 20 – Paynesville
Sierra Leone 3 (Bundu 19, Mu. Kamara 61, I. Turay 90+6)
Guinea-Bissau 1 (Monteiro 68)

Mar 21 – El Jadida
Burkina Faso 4 (Tiendrebeogo 12, B. Traore 33, Zougrana 47, L. Traore 67)
Djibouti 1 (Akinbinu 88 pen)

Mar 21 – Casablanca
Ethiopia 0
Egypt 2 (Salah 31, Zizo 40)

Mar 24 – Bissau
Guinea-Bissau 1 (Banjaqui 36)
Burkina Faso 2 (L. Traore 6, 73)

Mar 24 – El Jadida
Ethiopia 6 (Desta 19, 52, 70 pen, Nassir 34, 37, 58 pen)
Djibouti 1 (Akinbinu 51)

Mar 25 – Cairo
Egypt 1 (Zizo 45+2)
Sierra Leone 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egypt	6	5	1	0	14	2	16
Burkina Faso	6	3	2	1	13	7	11
Sierra Leone	6	2	2	2	7	7	8
Ethiopia	6	1	3	2	7	7	6
Guinea-Bissau	6	1	3	2	5	7	6
Djibouti	6	0	1	5	4	20	1

Group B

Mar 21 – Kinshasa
DR Congo 1 (Bongonda 45+3)
South Sudan 0

Mar 22 – Lome
Togo 2 (Klidje 4, Denkey 69)
Mauritania 2 (Koita 52, Mahmoud 55)

Mar 22 – Benghazi
Sudan 0
Senegal 0

Mar 25 – Nouadhibou
Mauritania 0
DR Congo 2 (Pickel 4, Mayele 83)

Mar 25 – Diamniadio
Senegal 2 (Sarr 35, Boma 67 og)
Togo 0

Mar 25 – Benghazi
Sudan 1 (M. Eisa 76)
South Sudan 1 (Sebit 90+8)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
DR Congo	6	4	1	1	7	2	13
Senegal	6	3	3	0	8	1	12
Sudan	6	3	3	0	8	2	12
Togo	6	0	4	2	4	7	4
South Sudan	6	0	3	3	2	10	3
Mauritania	6	0	2	4	2	9	2

Group C

Mar 20 – Durban
Zimbabwe 2 (Munetsi 44, Musona 59)
Benin 2 (Mounie 12, Dokou 35)

Mar 21 – Polokwane
South Africa 2 (Mofokeng 60, Adams 64)
Lesotho 0

Mar 21 – Kigali
Rwanda 0
Nigeria 2 (Osimhen 11, 45+3)

Mar 25 – Abidjan
Benin 0
South Africa 2 (Foster 53, Adams 84)

Mar 25 – Uyo
Nigeria 1 (Osimhen 74)
Zimbabwe 1 (Chirewa 90)

Mar 25 – Kigali
Rwanda 1 (Kwizera 58)
Lesotho 1 (Fothoane 82)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
South Africa	6	4	1	1	10	5	13
Rwanda	6	2	2	2	4	4	8
Benin	6	2	2	2	6	7	8
Nigeria	6	1	4	1	7	6	7
Lesotho	6	1	3	2	4	5	6
Zimbabwe	6	0	4	2	5	9	4

Group D

Mar 19 – Mbombela
Eswatini 0
Cameroon 0

Mar 20 – Praia
Cape Verde 1 (Semedo 84)
Mauritius 0

Mar 20 – Benghazi
Libya 1 (Ellafi 74)
Angola 1 (Fredy 90+3)

Mar 23 – Mbombela
Eswatini 3 (P. Mkhontfo 13, 18, Mabuza 75)
Mauritius 3 (Rose 47, Aristide 50, Vincent 90+1)

Mar 25 – Luanda
Angola 1 (Dala 50)
Cape Verde 2 (Livramento 45+2, 63)

Mar 25 – Yaounde
Cameroon 3 (Aboubakar 27 pen, 61, Mbeumo 53)
Libya 1 (El Maremi 90+1)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cape Verde	6	4	1	1	7	5	13
Cameroon	6	3	3	0	12	4	12
Libya	6	2	2	2	6	7	8
Angola	6	1	4	1	4	4	7
Mauritius	6	1	2	3	6	10	5
Eswatini	6	0	2	4	4	9	2

Group E

Mar 21 – Oujda
Niger 1 (Oumarou 47)
Morocco 2 (Saibari 59, El Khannouss 90+1)

Mar 25 – Oujda
Morocco 2 (Aguerd 51, Brahim 58 pen)
Tanzania 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco	5	5	0	0	14	2	15
Niger	4	2	0	2	6	4	6
Tanzania	4	2	0	2	2	4	6
Zambia	4	1	0	3	6	7	3
Congo	3	0	0	3	2	13	0
Eritrea*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Withdrew

Group F

Mar 20 – Franceville
Gabon 3 (Allevinah 3, Bouanga 30, 63)
Seychelles 0

Mar 20 – Abidjan
Gambia 3 (Barrow 55, 84, Minteh 61)
Kenya 3 (Olunga 69 pen, Bajaber 75, Wilson 90+6)

Mar 21 – Meknes
Burundi 0
Ivory Coast 1 (Guessand 16)

Mar 23 – Nairobi
Kenya 1 (Olunga 62)
Gabon 2 (Aubameyang 16, 52 pen)

Mar 24 – Abidjan
Ivory Coast 1 (Haller 15)
Gambia 0

Mar 25 – Meknes
Burundi 5 (Nduwarugira 22, Bimenyimana 24, 31, Kanakimana 50, Girumugisha 56)
Seychelles 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ivory Coast	6	5	1	0	14	0	16
Gabon	6	5	0	1	12	6	15
Burundi	6	3	1	2	13	7	10
Kenya	6	1	3	2	11	8	6
Gambia	6	1	1	4	12	13	4
Seychelles	6	0	0	6	2	30	0

Group G

Mar 20 – Cairo
Mozambique 3 (Pepo 3, 16, Ratifo 45+3)
Uganda 1 (Shaban 7)

Mar 21 – Francistown
Botswana 1 (Kopelang 70)
Algeria 3 (Gouiri 44, Amoura 52, 74)

Mar 21 – Abidjan
Guinea 0
Somalia 0

Mar 25 – Kampala
Uganda 1 (Okello 36)
Guinea 0

Mar 25 – Ouzou
Algeria 5 (Amoura 8, 30, 80, Mandi 24, Hadjam 65)
Mozambique 1 (Geny Catamo 40)

Mar 25 – Francistown
Botswana 2 (Mohutsiwa 74, Johnson 83)
Somalia 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria	6	5	0	1	16	6	15
Mozambique	6	4	0	2	10	11	12
Botswana	6	3	0	3	9	8	9
Uganda	6	3	0	3	6	7	9
Guinea	6	2	1	3	4	5	7
Somalia	6	0	1	5	3	11	1

Group H

Mar 19 – Paynesville
Liberia 0
Tunisia 1 (Mastouri 4)

Mar 20 – Lilongwe
Malawi 0
Namibia 1 (Tjiueza 40)

Mar 21 – Malabo
Equatorial Guinea 2 (Nsue 14, Salvador 17)
Sao Tome & Principe 0

Mar 24 – Polokwane
Namibia 1 (Shalulile 51)
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Coco 54)

Mar 24 – Tunis
Tunisia 2 (Jaziri 86, Achouri 90+2 pen)
Malawi 0

Mar 24 – Paynesville
Liberia 2 (Andrews 4, Farkarlun 32)
Sao Tome & Principe 1 (Dola 44)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tunisia	6	5	1	0	9	0	16
Namibia	6	3	3	0	8	2	12
Liberia	6	3	1	2	7	4	10
Equatorial Guinea	6	2	1	3	4	8	7
Malawi	6	2	0	4	4	6	6
Sao Tome & Principe	6	0	0	6	2	14	0

Group I

Mar 19 – Casablanca
Central African Republic 1 (Gambor 9)
Madagascar 4 (Raveloson 17, 21, Randrianantenaina 49, Rafanomezantsoa 89)

Mar 20 – Berkane
Comoros 0
Mali 3 (Nene 20, Doumbia 55, 63)

Mar 21 – Accra
Ghana 5 (Semenyo 2, Williams 31, J. Ayew 36 pen, Salisu 56, Nuamah 68)
Chad 0

Mar 24 – Al Hoceima
Madagascar 0
Ghana 3 (Partey 11, 53, Kudus 58)

Mar 24 – Casablanca
Central African Republic 0
Mali 0

Mar 25 – Berkane
Comoros 1 (Said 24)
Chad 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ghana	6	5	0	1	15	5	15
Comoros	6	4	0	2	9	7	12
Madagascar	6	3	1	2	9	6	10
Mali	6	2	3	1	8	4	9
Central African Rep	6	1	2	3	8	13	5
Chad	6	0	0	6	1	15	0

● *The nine group winners qualify for the finals; the four best runners-up enter the second round play-offs with the winners advancing to the inter-confederation play-offs*

ASIA Section

● *8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Third Round

Group A

Mar 20 – Tehran
Iran 2 (Azmoun 45+27, Mohebi 70)
United Arab Emirates 0

Mar 20 – Tashkent
Uzbekistan 1 (Alijonov 40)
Kyrgyzstan 0

Mar 20 – Doha
Qatar 5 (Afif 17, Al Ganehi 23, Kim Yu-song 34 og, Al Rawi 56, Alaaeldin 66)
North Korea 1 (Pak Kwang-hun 86)

Mar 25 – Tehran
Iran 2 (Taremi 52, 83)
Uzbekistan 2 (Erkinov 16, Fayzullaev 53)

Mar 25 – Bishkek
Kyrgyzstan 3 (Kichin 45+1, Mishchenko 82, Shukurov 90+3)
Qatar 1 (Mendes 52)

Mar 25 – Riyadh
North Korea 1 (Kim Yu-song 43)
United Arab Emirates 2 (Lima 5, Adil 90+8)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iran (Q)	8	6	2	0	16	7	20
Uzbekistan	8	5	2	1	11	7	17
UAE	8	4	1	3	14	7	13
Qatar	8	3	1	4	16	21	10
Kyrgyzstan	8	2	0	6	9	15	6
North Korea	8	0	2	6	7	16	2

Group B

Mar 20 – Goyang
South Korea 1 (Hwang Hee-chan 41)
Oman 1 (Al Busaidi 80)

Mar 20 – Basra
Iraq 2 (Hashim 90+3, Bayesh 90+11)
Kuwait 2 (Nasser 39, 70)

Mar 20 – Amman
Jordan 3 (Al Arab 3, Nasib 11, Al Taamari 45+3)
Palestine 1 (Seyam 33)

Mar 25 – Suwon
South Korea 1 (Lee Jae-sung 5)
Jordan 1 (Al Mardi 30)

Mar 25 – Amman
Palestine 2 (Abou Ali 88, Mahajna 90+7)
Iraq 1 (Hussein 34)

Mar 25 – Kuwait City
Kuwait 0
Oman 1 (Al Sabhi 56)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
South Korea	8	4	4	0	14	7	16
Jordan	8	3	4	1	13	7	13
Iraq	8	3	3	2	8	7	12
Oman	8	3	1	4	8	10	10
Palestine	8	1	3	4	7	12	6
Kuwait	8	0	5	3	7	14	5

Group C

Mar 20 – Sydney
Australia 5 (Boyle 18 pen, Velupillay 20, Irvine 34, 90, Miller 61)
Indonesia 1 (Romeny 78)

Mar 20 – Saitama
Japan 2 (Kamada 66, Kubo 87)
Bahrain 0

Mar 20 – Riyadh
Saudi Arabia 1 (S. Al Dawsari 50)
China 0

Mar 25 – Saitama
Japan 0
Saudi Arabia 0

Mar 25 – Hangzhou
China 0
Australia 2 (Irvine 16, Velupillay 29)

Mar 25 – Jakarta
Indonesia 1 (Romeny 24)
Bahrain 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Japan (Q)	8	6	2	0	24	2	20
Australia	8	3	4	1	13	6	13
Saudi Arabia	8	2	4	2	4	6	10
Indonesia	8	2	3	3	8	14	9
Bahrain	8	1	3	4	5	13	6
China	8	2	0	6	6	19	6

● *The top two teams in each group qualify for the finals; the third and fourth-placed teams advance to the fourth round to compete for two further finals slots and a fifth round place, the winners of which will enter the inter-confederation play-offs*

OCEANIA Section

● *1 direct slot available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Third Round

Semi-Finals

Mar 21 – Wellington
New Caledonia 3 (Gope-Fenepej 50, 76, Waya 90+1)
Tahiti 0

Mar 21 – Wellington
New Zealand 7 (Wood 6, 56, 60, Singh 16, Bindon 23, Payne 32, Barbarouses 73)
Fiji 0

Final

Mar 24 – Auckland
New Caledonia 0
New Zealand 3 (Boxall 61, Barbarouses 66, Just 80)
New Caledonia: Nyikeine – Iwa (Welepane 76), Simane (Bearune 66), Ranchain, Athale; Bako; Kenon, Zeoula (Waia 51), Jeno; Gope-Fenepej (Partodikromo 76), Haewegene (Waya 51).
New Zealand: Crocombe – Payne, Bindon, Boxall, Cacace (Rogerson 86); Stamenic, Singh (Rufer 70), Bell; McCowatt (Just 46), Wood (Barbarouses 54), Garbett (De Vries 46).

● *New Zealand qualify for the finals; New Caledonia enter the inter-confederation play-offs*

EUROPE Section

● *16 direct slots available*

Group G

Mar 21 – Ta'Qali
Malta 0
Finland 1 (Antman 38)
Malta: Bonello – Z. Muscat (Beerman 89), Carragher, Shaw; J. Mbong (Overend 83), Guillaumier, Satariano (Pepe 83), Chouaref, Camenzuli (Nwoko 71); P. Mbong (Tuma 71), Teuma.
Sent off: Shaw 78.
Finland: Hradacky – Alho, Tenho, Ivanov, Uronen (Ollila 63); Jensen, Peltola (Lod 46), Kairinen; Antman (Suhonen 82), Pohjanpalo (Hakans 63), Kallman (Pukki 71).

Mar 21 – Warsaw
Poland 1 (Lewandowski 81)
Lithuania 0
Poland: Skorupski – Piatkowski (Wieteska 77), Bednarek, Kiwior; Cash (Kaminski 68), S. Szymanski, Moder, Piotrowski (Bogusz 77), Frankowski; Swiderski (Piatek 68), Lewandowski (Buksa 86).
Lithuania: Gertmonas – Kazukolovas, Utkus, Tutyskinas; Sirvys (Milasius 74), Antanavicius (Vareika 84), Gineitis, Lasickas; Golubickas (Matulevicius 61), Dolznikov (Cernych 62); Kucys (Paulauskas 84).

Mar 24 – Kaunas
Lithuania 2 (Kucys 39, Gineitis 69)
Finland 2 (Kairinen 4, Pohjanpalo 17 pen)
Lithuania: Gertmonas – Sirvys, Kazukolovas, Girdvainis, Milasius; Matulevicius (Cernych 65), Utkus (Remeikis 77); Dolznikov (Golubickas 46), Gineitis, Lasickas; Kucys (Ruzgis 58).
Finland: Hradacky – Alho, Tenho (L. Vaisanen 46), Ivanov, Uronen; Lod (Suhonen 61), Kairinen, Kamara (Peltola 77); Antman (Pukki 86), Pohjanpalo (Kallman 61), Hakans.

Mar 24 – Warsaw
Poland 2 (Swiderski 27, 51)
Malta 0
Poland: Skorupski – Piatkowski, Bednarek (Wieteska 46), Kiwior; Frankowski (Cash 66), S. Szymanski, Moder, Bogusz (Slisz 46), Kaminski (Bereszynski 87); Swiderski, Piatek (Lewandowski 66).
Malta: Bonello – Z. Muscat (Lonardelli 58), Carragher, Pepe (J. Borg 83); J. Mbong (Overend 66), Guillaumier, Teuma, Satariano (Tuma 58), Camenzuli; Chouaref, P. Mbong (Nwoko 46).
Sent off: Chouaref 90+1.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Poland	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Finland	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Lithuania	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Netherlands	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Malta	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Group H

Mar 21 – Larnaca
Cyprus 2 (Pittas 55, Kakoullis 86)
San Marino 0
Cyprus: Mall – Satsias, Shielis, Panagiotou, Anderson Correia (Malekkides 74); Kousoulos (Kyriakou 74), Kastanos; Loizou (Gavriel 89), Sotiriou (Kakoullis 63), Tzionis (Kosti 63); Pittas.
San Marino: Colombo – Fabbri (G. Benvenuti 85), Cevoli, T. Benvenuti, Tosi; A. Golinucci, Capicchioni (Casadei 64), Zannoni (Giacopetti 77); Contadini, Nanni, Berardi (Sensoli 63).

Mar 21 – Bucharest
Romania 0
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Gigovic 14)
Romania: Nita – Ratiu, Popescu, Burca, Bancu; R. Marin (Mitrita 74), M. Marin (Sut 69), Stanciu; Man (Morutan 80), Dragus (Alibec 81), Tanase (Hagi 46).
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Vasilj – Malic (Bicakcic 87), Barisic, Radeljic, Kolasinac; Gigovic (Memic 62), Sunjic, Tahirovic (Burnic 77), Dedic (Saric 77); Demirovic, Dzeko (Bazdar 46).

Mar 24 – Zenica
Bosnia & Herzegovina 2 (Demirovic 22, Hajradinovic 56)
Cyprus 1 (Pittas 45+2)
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Vasilj – Malic (Burnic 72), Barisic (Katic 72), Radeljic, Kolasinac; Sunjic, Tahirovic (Saric 46); Hajradinovic (Basic 88), Gigovic (Bazdar 46), Dedic; Demirovic.
Cyprus: Mall – Satsias, Shielis, Laifis, Malekkides (Anderson Correia 88); Kousoulos (Tzionis 65); Loizou (Kyriakou 65), Kosti (Charalampous 72), Kastanos, Kakoullis (Sotiriou 88); Pittas
Sent off: Pittas 90+5.

Mar 24 – Serravalle
San Marino 1 (Zannoni 67)
Romania 5 (Cevoli 6 og, Popescu 44, R. Marin 55 pen, Hagi 75 pen, Alibec 90+5)
San Marino: Amici – G. Benvenuti, Cevoli, T. Benvenuti, Tosi (Riccardi 62); Contadini (Sensoli 46), A. Golinucci, Capicchioni (Casadei 46), Zannoni (Santi 76), Berardi (Giacopetti 66); Nanni.
Romania: Moldovan – Ratiu, Popescu (Ciobotariu 61), Burca, Bancu; R. Marin (Politic 80), M. Marin (Mitrita 46), Stanciu (Dragomir 61); Man, Dragus (Alibec 80), Hagi.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bosnia & Herz	2	2	0	0	3	1	6
Romania	2	1	0	1	5	2	3
Cyprus	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Austria	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
San Marino	2	0	0	2	1	7	0

Group I

Mar 22 – Chisinau
Moldova 0
Norway 5 (Ryerson 5, Haaland 23, Aasgaard 38, Sorloth 43, Donnum 69)
Moldova: Celeadnic – Revenco (Cojocaru 46), Craciun, Baboglo, Mudrac, Reabciuk; Caimacov (A. Boiciuc 87), Motpan (Stina 80), Rata (Posmac 81), Postolachi; Nicolaescu (Bodisteanu 65).
Norway: Nyland – Ryerson, Ajer, Ostigard (Heggem 37), Moller Wolfe; Berge; Odegaard, Aasgaard (Berg 63), Schjelderup (Hauge 63); Sortloth (Donnum 63), Haaland (Botheim 78).

Mar 22 – Debrecen
Israel 2 (Hein 23 og, Dasa 75)
Estonia 1 (Paskotsi 10)
Israel: Dan. Peretz – Dasa, Nachmias, Shlomo, Revivo; Jaber, Abu Fani (Dor. Peretz 75); Biton (E. Peretz 71), Gloukh (Shua 89), Solomon (Goldberg 89); David (Baribo 71).
Estonia: Hein (Igonen 46) – Peetson (J. Tamm 82), Paskotsi, Kuusk, Schjonning-Larsen; Soomets, Poom (Anier 82); Yakovlev (Hussar 59), Kait, Sinyavskiy; A. Tamm (Saarma 81).
Sent off: Soomets 87.

Mar 25 – Debrecen
Israel 2 (Abu Fani 55, Turgeman 90+3)
Norway 4 (Moller Wolfe 39, Sorloth 59, Ajer 65, Haaland 83)
Israel: Dan. Peretz – Abada (Dasa 61), Nachmias, Shlomo, Goldberg (Revivo 46); Dor. Peretz (Biton 61), E. Peretz (Khalaili 78), Jaber (Abu Fani 46), Solomon; Gloukh; Turgeman.
Norway: Nyland – Ryerson, Ajer, Heggem, Moller Wolfe (Gregersen 90); Odegaard (Pedersen 90+1), Berge, Berg (Berg Johnsen 75), Schjelderup (Donnum 61); Sortloth (Hauge 74), Haaland.

Mar 25 – Chisinau
Moldova 2 (Nicolaescu 67, Caimacov 90+1)
Estonia 3 (Peetson 19, Sappinen 30, Kait 70)
Moldova: Kozhukhar – Cojocaru, Craciun, Baboglo, Reabciuk; Motpan (Plastica 78), Rata; Postolachi (Stina 78), Caimacov, Bodisteanu (A. Boiciuc 85); Nicolaescu.
Sent off: Cojocaru 5.
Estonia: Igonen – Peetson (Saliste 52), Paskotsi, Kuusk, Schjonning-Larsen; Palumets, Ainsalu; Yakovlev (Miller 87), Kait, Sinyavskiy; Sappinen (A. Tamm 66).
Sent off: Palumets 48.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Norway	2	2	0	0	9	2	6
Estonia	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Israel	2	1	0	1	4	5	3
Italy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Moldova	2	0	0	2	2	8	0

Group J

Mar 22 – Vaduz
Liechtenstein 0
North Macedonia 3 (Trajkovski 7, Musliu 42, Miovski 84)
Liechtenstein: Buchel – S. Wolfinger (Zund 73), Traber, Wieser (Beck 73), Goppel (Kindle 55), Hofer; Luchiner, Hasler, Sele; Salanovic (Saglam 63), Pizzi (Notaro 63).
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Zajkov, Serafimov (Ilievski 46), Musliu, Alioski (Dimoski 63); Churlinov (Trapanovski 80), Alimi (Atanasov 46), Bardhi, Elmas; Miovski, Trajkovski (Toshevski 63).

Mar 22 – Cardiff
Wales 3 (D. James 9, B. Davies 47, Matondo 90)
Kazakhstan 1 (Tagybergen 32 pen)
Wales: Darlow – Roberts, Rodon, B. Davies, Williams; Sheehan, Cullen; D. James (Matondo 86), Brooks (J. James 62), Thomas; Johnson (Harris 62).
Kazakhstan: Zarutskiy – Tapalov, Bystrov, Marochkin, Alip, Vorogovskiy; Chesnokov (Kenzhebek 86), Tagybergen, Muzhikov (Zhukov 62), Samorodov (Satpaev 74); Zhaksylykov (Aymbetov 74).

Mar 25 – Vaduz
Liechtenstein 0
Kazakhstan 2 (Samorodov 42, Marochkin 45)
Liechtenstein: Buchel – Traber, Wieser, Oberwaditzer; Kindle (Zund 46), Luchiner (F. Wolfinger 77), Hasler, Sele (Schleger 82), Hofer (Notaro 64); Pizzi (Saglam 68), Salanovic.
Kazakhstan: Seysen – S. Astanov, Bystrov, Marochkin, Alip, Vorogovskiy (Zhagorov 72); Chesnokov (Zhaksylykov 72), Orazov (Tagybergen 65), Zhukov, Samorodov (Kenzhebek 65); Satpaev (E. Astanov 77).

Mar 25 – Skopje
North Macedonia 1 (Miovski 90+1)
Wales 1 (Brooks 90+6)
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Zajkov (Atanasov 61), Serafimov, Musliu; Ilievski (Dimoski 87), Alimi (Churlinov 61), Kostadinov, Alioski; Bardhi (Manev 90+2); Miovski (Trajkovski 90+2), Elmas.
Wales: Darlow – Williams, Rodon, Mepham, B. Davies; Sheehan (Allen 84), J. James; D. James (Moore 64), Broadhead (Brooks 75), Thomas; Johnson (Matondo 84).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
N. Macedonia	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Wales	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
Kazakhstan	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Belgium	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Liechtenstein	2	0	0	2	0	5	0

Group K

Mar 21 – Andorra la Vella
Andorra 0
Latvia 1 (Sits 58)
Andorra: Alvarez – Borra (Bernat 86), Llovera, C. Garcia, Olivera, Cervos; Rodrigo (Cucu 65), Teixeira (Vales 57), Babot (Rebes 86), Pujol (San Nicolas 57); Berto.
Latvia: Zviedris – Balodis, Cernomordijs, Jurkovskis; Savalnieks (Jaunzems 78), Melniks (Sits 46), Saveljevs, Ciganiks (Jagodinskis 90), Zelenkovs, Ikaunieks; Gutkovskis (Krollis 74).

Mar 21 – Wembley
England 2 (Lewis-Skelly 20, Kane 77)
Albania 0
England: Pickford – Walker, Konsa, Burn, Lewis-Skelly (James 90); Jones (Rogers 74), Rice (Henderson 82); Foden (Bowen 74), Bellingham, Rashford (Gordon 74); Kane.
Albania: Strakosha (Kastrati 82) – Balliu, Ajeti, Djimsiti, Aliji; Ramadani; Asani (Hoxha 78), Asllani, Laci (Pajaziti 78), Bajrami (Broja 63); Uzuni.

Mar 24 – Tirana
Albania 3 (Manaj 9, 19, Uzuni 90+2)
Andorra 0
Albania: Strakosha – Balliu, Ajeti, Djimsiti (Kumbulla 67), Aliji; Shehu, Asllani; Broja (Uzuni 76), Laci (Pajaziti 75), Hoxha; Manaj.
Andorra: Alvarez – Borra (Llovera 76), San Nicolas, C. Garcia, Olivera, M. Garcia; Rubio (Rodrigo 62), Rebes (Teixeira 62), Babot, Cervos (Lopez 87); Berto (Cucu 62).

Mar 24 – Wembley
England 3 (James 38, Kane 68, Eze 76)
Latvia 0
England: Pickford – James, Konsa, Guehi, Lewis-Skelly (Walker 79); Bellingham (Foden 67), Rice (Henderson 79); Bowen (Eze 61), Rogers, Rashford (Jones 79); Kane.
Latvia: Zviedris – Savalnieks (Jagodinskis 54), Jurkovskis (Daskevics 61), Cernomordijs, Balodis (Sliede 83), Ciganiks; Jaunzems, Saveljevs, Zelenkovs, Ikaunieks (Melniks 83); Gutkovskis (Sits 61).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
England	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
Albania	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Latvia	2	1	0	1	1	3	3
Serbia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Andorra	2	0	0	2	0	4	0

Group L

Mar 22 – Niksic
Montenegro 3 (Jovetic 22, Tuci 70, Marusic 73)
Gibraltar 1 (Bent 13)
Montenegro: Nikic – Vesovic, Tuci, Sipcic, Gasevic (A. Vukcevic 76); Jankovic, Loncar (Kuc 59); Camaj (Vukotic 76), Jovetic (Bakic 85), Krstovic; Mugosa (Marusic 59).
Gibraltar: Banda – Ronan, Lopes (McClafferty 83), Annesley, Britto; Bent (Pozo 82); Jessop (Valarino 65), De Barr, Scanlon (Walker 83), Richards; El Hmidi (Bartolo 72).

Mar 22 – Hradec Kralove
Czech Republic 2 (Schick 25, 85)
Faroe Islands 1 (G. Vatnhamar 83)
Czech Republic: Kovar – Coufal (Doudera 80), Holes (Zima 23), Krejci, Zeleny; Cerny (Sin 80), Soucek, Cerv (Kral 62), Sulc (Provod 61); Schick, Chory.
Faroe Islands: a Reynatrod – Benjaminsen (Danielsen 39), Faero, G. Vatnhamar, Edmundsson, Davidsen; Frederiksberg (Justinussen 79), Hansson (Joenson 64), Hendriksson (Klettskard 79), Sorensen; Knudsen (Olsen 64).

Mar 25 – Faro
Gibraltar 0
Czech Republic 4 (Cerny 21, Schick 50, Sulc 72, Kliment 90+5)
Gibraltar: Banda – Ronan, Lopes (McClafferty 25), Annesley, Britto (Mauro 52); De Barr (Bartolo 62), Bent, Scanlon; Jessop (Livingstone 62), El Hmidi (Pozo 62), Richards.
Czech Republic: Kovar – Coufal, Zima, Krejci, Zeleny (Jurasek 46); Cerv (Kral 63), Soucek; Cerny (Kuchta 79), Sulc (Sadilek 87), Provod; Schick (Kliment 62).

Mar 25 – Niksic
Montenegro 1 (Kuc 90+6)
Faroe Islands 0
Montenegro: Popovic – Vesovic (Radulovic 70), Vujacic, Sipcic, A. Vukcevic; (M. Vukcevic 77) Jankovic (Bakic 69), Loncar (Kuc 46); Marusic, Jovetic, Vukotic (Camaj 46); Krstovic.
Faroe Islands: Lamhauge – Danielsen, Faero, G. Vatnhamar, Edmundsson, Davidsen (Agnarsson 69); Sorensen (Frederiksberg 46), Hendriksson, Joenson (Mneney 57), Olsen (Justinussen 88); Knudsen (Klettskard 46).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Czech Rep	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Montenegro	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Croatia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Faroe Islands	2	0	0	2	1	3	0
Gibraltar	2	0	0	2	1	7	0

● *Groups A-F commence in September. The 12 group winners qualify for the finals; the 12 runners-up enter the second round play-offs alongside the four best-performing 2024-25 Nations League group winners/teams that don't finish in the top two places in the group stage*

SOUTH AMERICA Section

● *6 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Mar 20 – Asuncion
Paraguay 1 (Alderete 60)
Chile 0
Paraguay: Fernandez – Caceres, Balbuena, Alderete, Alonso; Sosa (Al. Romero 86), Bobadilla (Galarza Fonda 46), Cubas, Almiron (Villasanti 86); Sanabria (Avalos 77), Enciso (An. Romero 90+1).
Chile: Cortes – Loyola, Maripan, Diaz, Suazo; Vidal (Zampedri 71), Echeverria; Cepeda (Osorio 83), Pizarro (Cabral 71), Aravena (Valdes 60); Vargas (Aranguiz 72).

Mar 20 – Brasilia
Brazil 2 (Raphinha 6 pen, Vinicius Junior 90+9)
Colombia 1 (Diaz 41)
Brazil: Alisson (Bento 78) – Vanderson (Wesley 79), Marquinhos, Gabriel, Guilherme Arana; Rodrygo (Savinho 78), Gerson (Joelinton 28), Bruno Guimaraes (Andre 78), Raphinha; Joao Pedro (Matheus Cunha 60), Vinicius Junior (Leo Ortiz 90+12).
Colombia: Vargas – Munoz, Sanchez (Cuesta 75), Lucumi, Mojica; Rios, Lerma; J. Arias (Carrascal 87), James (Castano 90+6), Diaz; Cordoba (Borre 87).

Mar 20 – Lima
Peru 3 (Polo 37, Guerrero 45, Flores 82)
Bolivia 1 (Terceros 58 pen)
Peru: Gallese – Advincula, Garces, Abram, Trauco; Carrillo (Lopez 80), Tapia, Pena (Flores 73); Polo (Aquino 64), Reyna (Quevedo 65), Guerrero (Lapadula 80).
Bolivia: Viscarra – Medina, Haquin, Morales, Jo. Sagredo (Chavez 46); Villamil, Cuellar (Matheus 46), R. Vaca; Terceros (Paniagua 87), Algaranaz (Abrego 90), Fernandez.

Mar 21 – Quito
Ecuador 2 (Valencia 39, 46)
Venezuela 1 (Cadiz 90+1)
Ecuador: Galindez – Ordonez (Yeboah 62), Torres, Pacho, Estupinan; M. Caicedo, Vite (Mendez 90+3); Franco, Plata (Castillo 90+3), Corozo (J. Mercado 62); Valencia (Rodriguez 84).
Venezuela: Romo – Gonzalez, Mejias, Ferraresi, Makoun; Bueno (Rincon 46), Casseres, Segovia (Vargas 61, Hurtado 77); Bello, Rondon (Cadiz 61), Mendoza (Soteldo 46).

Mar 21 – Montevideo
Uruguay 0
Argentina 1 (Almada 68)
Uruguay: Rochet – Nandez, R. Araujo, Gimenez, M. Olivera; Valverde (Aguirre 72), Bentancur, De Arrascaeta (De la Cruz 42); Pellistri (Rodriguez 58), Nunez (Vinas 72), M. Araujo.
Argentina: E. Martinez – Molina, Romero, Otamendi, Tagliafico; Paredes (Balerdi 87), Mac Allister (Palacios 80); Simeone (Gonzalez 69), Fernandez, Almada (Correa 87); Alvarez.
Sent off: Gonzalez 90+5.

Mar 25 – El Alto
Bolivia 0
Uruguay 0
Bolivia: Viscarra – Medina (Rocha 72), Haquin, Morales, Jo. Sagredo (Fernandez 46); Terceros, Villamil, Cuellar (Chavez 81), Matheus (Paniagua 46), R. Vaca; Abrego (Algaranaz 62).
Uruguay: Rochet – Varela (Nandez 62), Gimenez, Caceres, M. Olivera (Piquerez 46); C. Olivera (Pellistri 46), Bentancur, Ugarte, M. Araujo; Vinas (Nunez 46), Aguirre (Valverde 46).

Mar 25 – Maturin
Venezuela 1 (Rondon 41 pen)
Peru 0
Venezuela: Romo – Gonzalez, Ferraresi, Angel, Aramburu; Savarino (Mejias 83), Herrera (Casseres 78), Jose Martinez (Rincon 78), Soteldo; Josef Martinez (Segovia 52), Rondon (Cadiz 78).
Peru: Gallese – Advincula, Zambrano, Garces, Lopez; Aquino (Flores 62), Tapia, Carrillo; Polo (Lapadula 83), Guerrero, Reyna (Quevedo 62).

Mar 25 – Barranquilla
Colombia 2 (Diaz 1, Duran 13)
Paraguay 2 (Alonso 45+4, Enciso 62)
Colombia: Vargas – Munoz, Cuesta, Lucumi, Mojica; Rios, Lerma; J. Arias (Mina 62), James (Campaz 62), Diaz; Duran.
Paraguay: Fernandez – Caceres (Velazquez 46), Balbuena, Alderete, Alonso; Cubas, Gomez (An. Romero 90+4); Almiron, Enciso (Sosa 73), Galarza Fonda (Villasanti 74); Avalos (Sanabria 62).

Mar 25 – Buenos Aires
Argentina 4 (Alvarez 4, Fernandez 12, Mac Allister 37, Simeone 71)
Brazil 1 (Matheus Cunha 26)
Argentina: E. Martinez – Molina, Romero, Otamendi, Tagliafico (Medina 76); Paredes (Palacios 82); De Paul, Mac Allister (Paz 76), Almada (Simeone 68); Fernandez, Alvarez (Correa 82).
Brazil: Bento – Wesley, Marquinhos, Murillo (Leo Ortiz 46), Guilherme Arana; Andre (Ederson 84), Joelinton (Joao Gomes 46); Raphinha, Matheus Cunha (Savinho 69), Rodrygo (Endrick 46); Vinicius Junior.

Mar 25 – Santiago
Chile 0
Ecuador 0
Chile: Cortes – Loyola, Maripan, Diaz, Suazo; Vidal (Cabral 65), Echeverria (Pavez 77), Pizarro (Aranguiz 76); Osorio, Vargas (Zampedri 76), Valdes.
Ecuador: Galindez – Ordonez, Pacho, Hincapie; Franco, M. Caicedo, Vite, Estupinan (Torres 81); Plata, Valencia, Guagua (Corozo 60).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Argentina (Q)	14	10	1	3	26	8	31
Ecuador	14	7	5	2	13	5	23
Uruguay	14	5	6	3	17	10	21
Brazil	14	6	3	5	20	16	21
Paraguay	14	5	6	3	11	9	21
Colombia	14	5	5	4	18	14	20
Venezuela	14	3	6	5	13	17	15
Bolivia	14	4	2	8	4	30	14
Peru	14	2	4	8	6	17	10
Chile	14	2	4	8	9	21	10

*Deducted 3 points

● *The top six teams qualify for the finals; the seventh-placed team enter the inter-confederation play-offs*

2024-25 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Mar 20 – Rotterdam
Netherlands 2 (Gakpo 28, Reijnders 46)
Spain 2 (Williams 9, Merino 90+3)
Netherlands: Verbruggen – Geertruida, Van Hecke, Van Dijk, Hato; Reijnders (Wieffer 90+1), De Jong (Koopmeiners 74); Frimpong, Kluivert (Simons 74), Gakpo; Memphis (De Ligt 84).
Sent off: Hato 81.
Spain: Simon – Porro, Le Normand, Cubarsi (Huijsen 41), Cucurella; Pedri (Olmo 66), Zubimendi, Fabian (Merino 84); Yamal (Oyarzabal 66), Morata (Ayoze 66), Williams.

Mar 20 – Split
Croatia 2 (Budimir 26, Perisic 45+1)
France 0
Croatia: Livakovic – Stanisic, Sutalo, Caleta-Car, Gvardiol; Modric, Kovacic; Perisic (Vlasic 70), Baturina (Pasalic 60), Kramaric (Sucic 85); Budimir (Ivanovic 60).
France: Maignan – Kounde, Konate (Upamecano 46), Saliba, Digne; Guendouzi (Kone 84), Tchouameni, Rabiot (Camavinga 64); Dembele (Olise 84); Kolo Muani (Barcola 64), Mbappe.

Mar 20 – Copenhagen
Denmark 1 (Hojlund 78)
Portugal 0
Denmark: Schmeichel – Kristensen, Andersen, Vestergaard, Maehle; Hjulmand, Norgaard; Isaksen (Dorgu 87), Eriksen (Wind 86), Lindstrom (Skov Olsen 69); Biereth (Hojlund 69).
Portugal: Costa – Dalot (Semedo 66), Dias, Veiga (Inacio 76), Mendes; Vitinha, J. Neves (B. Silva 86); Neto, Fernandes, Leao (R. Neves 76); Ronaldo.

Mar 20 – Milan
Italy 1 (Tonali 9)
Germany 2 (Kleindienst 49, Goretzka 76)
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Bastoni, Calafiori; Politano (Bellanova 64), Barella (Frattesi 84), Rovella (Ricci 64), Tonali, Udogie; Kean (Lucca 83), Raspadori (Maldini 71).
Germany: Baumann – Kimmich, Tah, Rudiger, Raum (Schlotterbeck 46); Gross (Andrich 90), Goretzka; Amiri (Leweling 66), Sane (Adeyemi 82), Musiala; Burkardt (Kleindienst 46).

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Mar 23 – Valencia
Spain 3 (Oyarzabal 8, 67 pen, Yamal 103)
Netherlands 3 (Memphis 54 pen, Maatsen 79, Simons 109 pen)
After Extra-Time. 5-5 on aggregate
Spain win 5-4 on pens
Spain: Simon – Mingueza (Porro 94), Le Normand, Huijsen, Cucurella; Zubimendi (Garcia 105), Fabian (Merino 84); Yamal, Olmo (Pedri 84), Williams (Baena 117); Oyarzabal (F. Torres 69).
Netherlands: Verbruggen – Geertruida (Malen 78), Van Hecke, Van Dijk, Maatsen; Reijnders (Koopmeiners 110), De Jong (Taylor 105); Frimpong, Kluivert (Simons 78), Gakpo (Lang 77); Memphis (Brobbey 101).

Mar 23 – Saint-Denis
France 2 (Olise 52, Dembele 80)
Croatia 0
After Extra-Time. 2-2 on aggregate
France win 5-4 on pens
France: Maignan – Kounde, Upamecano, Saliba, T. Hernandez; Tchouameni, Kone (Zaire-Emery 111); Dembele (Kolo Muani 99), Olise (Camavinga 105), Barcola (Doue 66); Mbappe.
Croatia: Livakovic – Stanisic, Sutalo, Caleta-Car, Gvardiol (Pongracic 105); Modric (Moro 82), Kovacic (Jakic 82); Perisic (Pasalic 71), Sucic, Kramaric (Baturina 71); Budimir (Ivanovic 60).

Mar 23 – Lisbon
Portugal 5 (Andersen 38 og, Ronaldo 72, Trincao 86, 91, Ramos 115)
Denmark 2 (Kristensen 56, Eriksen 76)
After Extra-Time. Portugal win 5-3 on aggregate

Portugal: Costa – Dalot (Trincao 81), Dias, Inacio, Mendes; Fernandes, Vitinha (R. Neves 99), B. Silva; Conceicao (Semedo 81), Ronaldo (Ramos 90+2), Leao (Jota 62).
Denmark: Schmeichel – Kristensen, Andersen, Vestergaard, Dorgu (Harder 97); Norgaard (Froholdt 83), Hjulmand; Isaksen (Kristiansen 63), Eriksen (Frendrup 83), Lindstrom (Skov Olsen 65); Hojlund (Biereth 73).

Mar 23 – Dortmund
Germany 3 (Kimmich 30 pen, Musiala 36, Kleindienst 45)
Italy 3 (Kean 49, 69, Raspadori 90+5 pen)
Germany win 5-4 on aggregate
Germany: Baumann – Kimmich, Rudiger (Bisseck 77), Tah, Schlotterbeck; Stiller (Gross 63), Goretzka (Amiri 63); Sane (Adeyemi 63), Musiala (Andrich 77), Mittelstadt; Kleindienst.
Italy: Donnarumma – Gatti (Politano 46), Buongiorno, Bastoni; Di Lorenzo, Barella, Ricci (Zaccagni 85), Tonali (Raspadori 68), Udogie; Kean (Lucca 85), Maldini (Frattesi 46).

Finals Draw

Semi-Finals

Jun 4:
Germany v Portugal;
Jun 5:
Spain v France

Final and third-place play-off take place on June 8

Promotion Relegation Play-Offs

League A-B Play-Offs – 1st Leg

Mar 20 – Istanbul
Turkey 3 (Kokcu 9, Akturkoglu 69, Kahveci 73)
Hungary 1 (Schafer 25)
Turkey: Cakir – Ayhan (Muldur 27), Akaydin, Bardakci, Elmali; Kokcu (Yuksek 72), Calhanoglu; Aydin (Kahveci 72), Yildiz, Alper Yilmaz (Gul 46); Akturkoglu (Uzun 85).
Hungary: Dibusz – Fiola, Orban, M, Dardai; Bolla (Osvath 90+2), Schafer (Kata 46), Nikitscher (Gazdag 90+2), Kerkez; Szoboszlai, Z. Nagy (Csoboth 77); Varga (Szabo 70).

Mar 20 – Murcia
Ukraine 3 (Hutsulyak 66, Vanat 73, Zabarnyi 78)
Belgium 1 (Lukaku 40)
Ukraine: Lunin – Konoplya (Sych 25, Yarmoliuk 62), Zabarnyi, Matviyenko, Mykolenko; Kaliuzhnyi (Nazaryna 88); Tsyhankov, Zinchenko, Shaparenko (Vanat 62), Sudakov; Yaremchuk (Hutsulyak 63).
Belgium: Courtois – Meunier, De Winter (Raskin 80), Mechele, De Cuyper (Mokio 88); Debast, Tielemans; De Ketelaere (Lukebakio 70), De Bruyne (Vanaken 70), Trossard (Saelemaekers 80); Lukaku.

Mar 20 – Vienna
Austria 1 (Gregoritsch 37)
Serbia 1 (Samardzic 61)
Austria: A. Schlager – Wimmer, Lienhart, Alaba, Mwene; Seiwald, Grillitsch (X. Schlager 77); Schmid (Florucz 77), Gregoritsch (Stoger 89), Baumgartner (Cham 70); Arnautovic.
Serbia: Rajkovic – Erakovic, Gudelj (Simic 68), Babic; Mimovic, N. Maksimovic, Lukic (A. Maksimovic 82), Birmancevic (S. Mitrovic 46); Samardzic (Cvetkovic 87); Vlahovic, Jovic (Topic 68).

Mar 20 – Piraeus
Greece 0
Scotland 1 (McTominay 33 pen)
Greece: Tzolakis – Rota, Mavropanos, Koulierakis, Tsimikas; Siopsis, Mantalos (Pelkas 72); Masouras (Karetsas 46), Konstantelias (Pavlidis 72), Tzolis (Zafeiris 72); Ioannidis (Fountas 81).
Scotland: Gordon – Ralston (Porteous 89), Souttar, Hanley, Robertson; Gilmour (Johnston 90+4), McLean (Tierney 76); McGinn, McTominay, Ferguson; Adams (Hirst 75).

League A-B Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Mar 23 – Budapest
Hungary 0
Turkey 3 (Calhanoglu 37 pen, Guler 39, Bardakci 90)
Turkey win 6-1 on aggregate and are promoted to League A, Hungary are relegated to League B
Hungary: Dibusz – Fiola (Nego 46), Orban, M. Dardai (Szalai 60); Bolla, B. Dardai (Nikitscher 46), Vecsei (Csoboth 74), Kerkez; Gazdag (Toth 60), Szoboszlai; Varga.
Turkey: Cakir – Muldur, Akaydin, Bardakci, Elmali; Calhanoglu, Yuksek (Ozcan 46); Aydin (Gul 71), Guler (Kahveci 64), Yildiz (Akcicek 82); Akturkoglu (Alper Yilmaz 64).

Mar 23 – Genk
Belgium 3 (De Cuyper 70, Lukaku 75, 86)
Ukraine 0
Belgium win 4-3 on aggregate and remain in League A, Ukraine remain in League B
Belgium: Sels – Meunier (De Cuyper 69), Faes, Debast, Castagne; De Bruyne, Raskin (Heynen 90), Vanaken; Trossard (Saelemaekers 69), Lukaku, Doku.
Ukraine: Lunin – Zabarnyi, Svatok (Yaremchuk 89), Matviyenko; Zinchenko, Kaliuzhnyi, Yarmoliuk, Mykolenko (Mykhailichenko 69); Hutsulyak (Yarmolenko 89), Sudakov (Tsyhankov 69); Vanat (Dovbyk 69).

Mar 23 – Belgrade
Serbia 2 (N. Maksimovic 56, Vlahovic 90)
Austria 0
Serbia win 3-1 on aggregate and remain in League A, Austria remain in League B
Serbia: Rajkovic – Erakovic, Milenkovic, Pavlovic; Zivkovic (Mimovic 90+2), Gudelj (S. Mitrovic 46), N. Maksimovic, Terzic (Jovic 46); Samardzic (A. Maksimovic 83), Lukic (Topic 83); Vlahovic.
Austria: A. Schlager – Wimmer, Trauner, Lienhart, Mwene (Grull 46); Grillitsch (Alaba 75), Seiwald; Schmid, Laimer, Cham (Arnautovic 46); Gregoritsch (Stoger 75).
Sent off: Trauner 68.

Mar 23 – Glasgow
Scotland 0
Greece 3 (Konstantelias 20, Karetsas 42, Tzolis 46)
Greece win 3-1 on aggregate and are promoted to League A, Scotland are relegated to League B
Scotland: Gordon – Ralston, Souttar, Hanley, Robertson (Wilson 73); Gilmour (Tierney 55), McLean (Ferguson 55); Christie (Conway 73), McTominay, McGinn; Adams (Hirst 55).
Greece: Tzolakis – Vagiannidis, Mavropanos, Koulierakis, Giannoulis; Zafeiris, Mouzakitis (Ioannidis 83); Karetsas (Masouras 73), Konstantelias (Pelkas 73), Tzolis (Retsos 90+2); Pavlidis (Galanopoulos 83).

League B-C Play-Offs – 1st Leg

Mar 20 – Pristina
Kosovo 2 (Dellova 19, Rexhbecaj 58)
Iceland 1 (Oskarsson 22)
Kosovo: Muric – Vojvoda (Aliti 80), Am. Rrahmani, Dellova, Paqarada; Rexhbecaj, Berisha (Demaku 46); E. Krasniqi, Rashica (Emerllahu 89), Rrudhani (Sahiti 46); Muriqi (Al. Rrahmani 89).
Iceland: Valdimarsson – Palsson, Gunnarsson, Ingason, Tomasson (Thorsteinsson 65); Ellertsson (Helgason 89), Johanesson (Thordharson 66), Haraldsson, Gudjohnsen; Gudmundsson (Traustason 65); Oskarsson.

Mar 20 – Plovdiv
Bulgaria 1 (M. Petkov 6)
Republic of Ireland 2 (Azaz 21, Doherty 42)
Bulgaria: Mitov (P. Iliev 46) – Nedyalkov, Atanasov, A. Petkov, Nurnberger (Minkov 72); M. Petkov, A. Kraev (Nikolov 85), Gruev, Despodov; Krastev (I. Iliev 85), L. Petkov (B. Kraev 72).
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – Doherty, Collins, O'Shea, Brady; Johnston (Sykes 76), Knight (Vata 79), Cullen, Manning (O'Brien 79); Azaz (Taylor 76), Parrott (Ferguson 76).

Mar 20 – Yerevan
Armenia 0
Georgia 3 (Kochorashvili 32, Mikautadze 37, 59)
Armenia: Cancarevic – Harutyunyan, Haroyan, Muradyan (Hambardzumyan 80), Tiknizyan; Iwu (N. Grigorian 65), Dashyan (Udo 46); Barseghyan, Sevikyan, Manvelyan (Bichakhchyan 46); Miranyan (Kaloukian 57).
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Kakabadze, Goglichidze, Lochoshvili (Dvali 70), Azarovi (Gocholeishvili 75); Kochorashvili, Kvekveskiri, Kiteishvili (Mekvabishvili 66); Davitashvili, Mikautadze (Zivzivadze 66), Chakvetadze (Tsitaishvili 66).

Mar 20 – Bratislava
Slovakia 0
Slovenia 0
Slovakia: Dubravka – Gyomber, Vavro (Obert 11, Mesik 46), Skriniar, Hancko; Bero, Lobotka, Duda (Benes 84); Suslov, Bozenik (Mraz 78), Haraslin (Schranz 78).
Slovenia: Oblak – Karnicnik, Drkusic, Bijol, Janza; Stojanovic (Horvat 79), Lovric (Zeljkovic 90), Elsnik (Gorenc Stankovic 78), Mlakar (Vipotnik 31); Petrovic, Sesko (Kramer 90).

League B-C Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Mar 23 – Murcia
Iceland 1 (Oskarsson 2)
Kosovo 3 (Muriqi 35, 45+3, 79)
Kosovo win 5-2 on aggregate and are promoted to League B, Iceland are relegated to League C
Iceland: Valdimarsson – Lunddal Fridriksson (Bjarkason 22), Thordharson, Ingason, Johanesson (Tomasson 46); Willumsson (Hlynsson 65), Helgason, Traustason (Gunnarsson 46), Thorsteinsson; Gudmundsson, Oskarsson (Gudjohnsen 65).
Sent off: Gunnarsson 69.
Kosovo: Saipi – Vojvoda, Am. Rrahmani, Dellova, Paqarada; E. Krasniqi (I. Krasniqi 78), Rexhbecaj, Demaku (Emerllahu 55), Muslija (Gallapeni 87); Rashica (Sahiti 78); Muriqi (Al. Rrahmani 87).

Mar 23 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 2 (Ferguson 63, Idah 84)
Bulgaria 1 (Antov 30)
Republic of Ireland win 4-2 on aggregate and remain in League B, Bulgaria remain in League C
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – Doherty, Collins, O'Brien, Brady (Manning 66); Johnston (Idah 65), Cullen, Knight (Taylor 82), Azaz; Ferguson (Dunne 74), Parrott (Sykes 66).
Bulgaria: P. Iliev – Minkov, Antov, S. Petrov, Nedyalkov, Nurnberger (I. Iliev 89); M. Petkov (Kirilov 75), Milanov (Krastev 75), Gruev (Shopov 89), Despodov; B. Kraev (Nikolov 60).

Mar 23 – Tbilisi
Georgia 6 (Haroyan 4 og, Mikautadze 14, 35, Chakvetadze 23, Kiteishvili 27, Kvaratskhelia 62)
Armenia 1 (Sevikyan 48)
Georgia win 9-1 on aggregate and remain in League B, Armenia remain in League C
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Kakabadze, Kashia, Goglichidze (Dvali 69), Tsitaishvili (Guliashvili 70); Kochorashvili, Mekvabishvili; Chakvetadze (Shengelia 46), Kiteishvili (Zaria 77), Kvaratskhelia; Mikautadze (Zivzivadze 77).
Armenia: Cancarevic – Harutyunyan, Haroyan, Muradyan (Hambardzumyan 80), Tiknizyan; Iwu (N. Grigorian 65), Dashyan (Udo 46); Barseghyan, Sevikyan, Manvelyan (Bichakhchyan 46); Miranyan (Kaloukian 57).

Mar 23 – Ljubljana
Slovenia 1 (Gnezda Cerin 95)
Slovakia 0
After Extra-Time, Slovenia win 1-0 on aggregate and remain in League B, Slovakia remain in League C
Slovenia: Oblak – Karnicnik (Brekalo 120+1), Drkusic, Bijol, Janza; Lovric (Petrovic 67), Gnezda Cerin (Zeljkovic 120+1), Elsnik (Kramer 90); Stojanovic, Sesko, Vipotnik (Gorenc Stankovic 84).
Slovakia: Dubravka – Gyomber, Skriniar, Mesik (Duris 118), Hancko; Bero (Tupta 105), Lobotka, Duda (Benes 99); Suslov, Bozenik (Mraz 75), Schranz (Haraslin 75).

2024-25 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

Finals

Semi-Finals

Mar 20 – Inglewood
Canada 0
Mexico 2 (Jimenez 1, 75)
Canada: St Clair – Johnston, Bombito, Cornelius, Davies; Eustaquio, Kone (Choiniere 67); Ahmed (Buchanan 67), David, Osorio (Shaffelburg 60); Larin (Oluwaseyi 79).
Mexico: Malagon – Reyes, Alvarez, Vasquez; Alvarado, Rodriguez (Romo 54), Lira (Chavez 89), Gallardo; Gimenez (Quinones 80), Jimenez, Vega (Huerta 54).

Mar 20 – Inglewood
United States 0
Panama 1 (Waterman 90+4)
United States: Turner – Musah, Richards (McKenzie 79), Ream, Scally; Adams, Tessmann (McGlynn 68); McKennie, Pulisic, Weah; Sargent (Agyemang 68).
Panama: Mosquera – Blackman (Anderson 80), Harvey, Farina, Cordoba, Gutierrez; Martinez (Morales 90+2), Carrasquilla, Godoy, Rodriguez (Diaz 90+1); Fajardo (Waterman 70).

Third-Place Play-Off

Mar 23 – Inglewood
Canada 2 (Oluwaseyi 27, David 59)
United States 1 (Agyemang 35)
Canada: St Clair – Johnston, Bombito, Cornelius, Davies (Sigur 12); Choiniere (Eustaquio 87), Kone; Ahmed (Osorio 87), David, Buchanan (Shaffelburg 66); Oluwaseyi (Larin 66).
United States: Turner – Arfsten, McKenzie, Carter-Vickers, Scally (Fossey 46); Adams (Reyna 69), McKennie (Musah 69); Luna, Pulisic (Tessmann 69), Weah; Agyemang (White 78).

Final

Mar 23 – Inglewood
Mexico 2 (Jimenez 8, 90+2 pen)
Panama 1 (Carrasquilla 45+2 pen)
Mexico: Malagon – Reyes, Montes, Vasquez, Gallardo (Angulo 90+6); Alvarado, Alvarez, Romo (Chavez 63), Huerta (Vega 64); Gimenez (Pineda 90+6), Jimenez.
Panama: Mosquera – Blackman, Harvey, Farina (Diaz 90+2), Cordoba, Gutierrez; Martinez (Morales 75), Godoy, Carrasquilla, Rodriguez; Waterman (Fajardo 62).

2025 CONCACAF GOLD CUP

Prelims – 1st Leg

Mar 21 – Belmopan
Belize 0
Costa Rica 7 (Ugalde 7, 36 pen, K. Vargas 38, Mitchell 65, Zamora 70, 88, Alcocer 81)

Mar 21 – Kingstown
St Vincent & Grenadines 1 (Anderson 65)
Jamaica 1 (Bailey 90+4 pen)

Mar 21 – Devonshire
Bermuda 3 (Crichlow 1, Parfitt 44, Lewis 90+2 pen)
Honduras 5 (Quioto 60, 66, Palma 64, Martinez 89, Pinto 90+4)

Mar 21 – Bridgetown
Guyana 3 (Jones 9, 36, 56)
Guatemala 2 (Martinez 29, Pinto 80 pen)

Mar 21 – Santiago de Cuba
Cuba 1 (Matos 6)
Trinidad & Tobago 2 (Lee 20, Yeates 53)

Mar 21 – Paramaribo
Suriname 1 (Kerk 52)
Martinique 0

Mar 21 – Le Gosier
Guadeloupe 1 (David 17)
Nicaragua 0

Prelims – 2nd Leg

Mar 25 – San Jose
Costa Rica 6 (Arzu 1 og, Bran 6, 66, Martinez 8, Ugalde 36, Zamora 69)
Belize 1 (Bernardez 47)
Costa Rica win 13-1 on aggregate

Mar 25 – Kingston
Jamaica 3 (Brown 27, Johnson 89 og, Cephas 90+4)
St Vincent & Grenadines 0
Jamaica win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 25 – Tegucigalpa
Honduras 2 (Benguche 53, Palma 57)
Bermuda 0
Honduras win 7-3 on aggregate

Mar 25 – Guatemala City
Guatemala 2 (Rubin 11, Lemus 76)
Guyana 0
Guatemala win 4-3 on aggregate

Mar 25 – Couva
Trinidad & Tobago 4 (Lee 22, 37, Molino 51, James 84)
Cuba 0
Trinidad & Tobago win 6-1 on aggregate

Mar 25 – Fort-de-France
Martinique 0
Suriname 1 (Pherai 80)
Suriname win 2-0 on aggregate

Mar 25 – Managua
Nicaragua 0
Guadeloupe 1 (Mirval 64)
Guadeloupe win 2-0 on aggregate

2027 ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS

Third Round

Group A

Mar 25 – Dushanbe
Tajikistan 1 (Hanonov 3)
Timor-Leste 0

Mar 25 – Capas
Philippines 4 (J. Tabinas 6, Kristensen 19, Schneider 77, Reyes 90+2)
Maldives 1 (Fasir 62)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Philippines	1	1	0	0	4	1	3
Tajikistan	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Timor-Leste	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
Maldives	1	0	0	1	1	4	0

Group B

Mar 25 – Al Wakrah
Lebanon 5 (Fakhro 5, 28, Merheg 21, Chakroun 33, Haidar 90)
Brunei 0

Mar 25 – Thimphu
Bhutan 0
Yemen 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lebanon	1	1	0	0	5	0	3
Bhutan	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Yemen	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Brunei	1	0	0	1	0	5	0

Group C

Mar 25 – Shillong
India 0
Bangladesh 0

Mar 25 – Kallang
Singapore 0
Hong Kong 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
India	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Hong Kong	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Bangladesh	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Singapore	1	0	1	0	0	0	1

Group D

Mar 25 – Bangkok
Thailand 1 (Gustavsson 43)
Sri Lanka 0

Mar 25 – Kaohsiung
Chinese Taipei 1 (Kouame 63)
Turkmenistan 2 (Tagayew 48, Gurbanow 83)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Turkmenistan	1	1	0	0	2	1	3
Thailand	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Chinese Taipei	1	0	0	1	1	2	0
Sri Lanka	1	0	0	1	0	1	0

Group E

Mar 25 – Al Hofuf
Syria 2 (Faqa 23, Al Somah 56)
Pakistan 0

Mar 25 – Yangon
Myanmar 2 (Than Paing 28, Maung Maung Lwin 75)
Afghanistan 1 (Popalzay 14)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Syria	1	1	0	0	2	0	3
Myanmar	1	1	0	0	2	1	3
Afghanistan	1	0	0	1	1	2	0
Pakistan	1	0	0	1	0	2	0

Group F

Mar 25 – Thu Dau Mot
Vietnam 5 (Chau Ngoc Quang 11, Nguyen Van Vi 44, 50, Nguyen Hai Long 63, Nguyen Quang Hai 84)
Laos 0

Mar 25 – Iskandar Puteri
Malaysia 2 (Hevel 29, Corbin-Ong 71)
Nepal 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vietnam	1	1	0	0	5	0	3
Malaysia	1	1	0	0	2	0	3
Nepal	1	0	0	1	0	2	0
Laos	1	0	0	1	0	5	0

CHAN 2024 QUALIFIERS

Second Stage

First Round – 1st Leg

Feb 28 – Thies
Gambia 0
Gabon 0

Mar 2 – Lilongwe
Comoros 0
Malawi 2 (Katinji 43, Kalima 90)

Mar 2 – Bloemfontein
South Africa 1 (Webber 80)
Egypt 1 (Antar 66)

First Round – 2nd Leg

Mar 8 – Lilongwe
Gabon 0
Gambia 0
Gambia win 5-3 on pens

Mar 8 – Franceville
Malawi 2 (Lungu 50, Katinji 59)
Comoros 0
Malawi win 4-0 on aggregate

Mar 9 – Ismailia
Egypt 1 (Shika 32)
South Africa 3 (Maema 15, Mfolozi 26, Luthuli 50)
South Africa win 4-2 on aggregate

Second Round

May 1: Malawi v South Africa; Gambia v Algeria
May 8: South Africa v Malawi, Algeria v Gambia

FRIENDLIES

Mar 6 – Kingstown
St Vincent & Grenadines 1 (T. Williams 85 og)
Grenada 1 (K. Williams 82)

Mar 9 – Kingstown
St Vincent & Grenadines 1 (Mingott 42)
Grenada 1 (Ankis 62 pen)

Mar 13 – Muscat
Oman 0
Sudan 0

Mar 16 – Fort Lauderdale
Honduras 1 (Hernandez 26)
Guatemala 2 (Ardon 31, Escobar 86)

Mar 19 – Hong Kong
Hong Kong 2 (Jones 26, Merkies 40)
Macau 0

Mar 19 – Belek
Kazakhstan 2 (Samorodov 15, Tagybergen 36)
Curacao 0

Mar 19 – Shillong
India 3 (Bheke 34, Colaco 66, Chhetri 76)
Maldives 0

Mar 19 – Thu Dau Mot
Vietnam 2 (Nguyen Hai Long 26, Nguyen Van Vi 35)
Cambodia 1 (Samuel 64)

Mar 19 – Moscow
Russia 5 (Prutsev 16, Adamov 42, Dzyuba 43, Fomin 53, Bakaev 59)
Grenada 0

Mar 20 – Vientiane
Laos 1 (Souvanny 89)
Sri Lanka 2 (Dekker 18, Rajamohan 55)

Mar 20 – Dushanbe
Tajikistan 0
Belarus 5 (Lisakovich 64, Melnichenko 72, Yablonskiy 84, Ebong 86, Kontsevoy 90+1)

Mar 20 –Al Khor
Lebanon 4 (Osman 57, Budib 85, Merheg 88, 90)
Timor-Leste 0

Mar 21 – Bangkok
Thailand 2 (Gustavsson 6, 52)
Afghanistan 0

Mar 21 – Belfast
Northern Ireland 1 (Price 16)
Switzerland 1 (Sierro 28)

Mar 21 – Kallang
Singapore 0
Nepal 1 (Jung Karki 12)

Mar 22 – Luxembourg
Luxembourg 1 (Korac 23)
Sweden 0

Mar 22 – Bayamon
Puerto Rico 2 (Rivera 21, Sulia 90+3)
Dominican Republic 2 (Dollenmayer 45+3, Vasquez 58)

Mar 22 – Sumgayit
Azerbaijan 0
Haiti 3 (Pierrot 9, 63, Jean Jacques 83)

Mar 24 – Phnom Penh
Cambodia 1 (Luydens 57 og)
Aruba 2 (Bennett 3, Ostiana 11)

Mar 25 – Moscow
Russia 5 (Glushenkov 8, 53, 58, Vakhania 44, Batrakov 73)
Zambia 0

Mar 25 – Masazir
Azerbaijan 0
Belarus 2 (Zabelin 59, Demchenko 78)

Mar 25 – Stockholm
Sweden 5 (Holm 7, Nygren 32, Sema 59, Isak 64, Elanga 77)
Northern Ireland 1 (Price 89)

Mar 25 – St Gallen
Switzerland 3 (Vargas 9, Embolo 12 pen, Muheim 29)
Luxembourg 1 (Sinani 89 pen)

Mar 26 – Santiago de los Caballeros
Dominican Republic 2 (Diaz 20, Firpo 85 pen)
Puerto Rico 0

2025 UNDER-20 ASIAN CUP

Group A

Feb 12: Australia 5-1 Kyrgyzstan; China 2-1 Qatar
Feb 15: Qatar 1-3 Australia; Kyrgyzstan 2-5 China
Feb 18: China 1-2 Australia; Kyrgyzstan 0-4 Qatar

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Australia (Q)	3	3	0	0	10	3	9
China (Q)	3	2	0	1	8	5	6
Qatar	3	1	0	2	6	5	3
Kyrgyzstan	3	0	0	3	3	14	0

Group B

Feb 13:
Iraq 1-1 North Korea; Jordan 0-1 Saudi Arabia
Feb 16:
North Korea 1-2 Jordan; Saudi Arabia 0-1 Iraq
Feb 19:
Iraq 0-0 Jordan; Saudi Arabia 2-1 North Korea

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saudi Arabia (Q)	3	2	0	1	3	2	6
Iraq (Q)	3	1	2	0	2	1	5
Jordan	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
North Korea	3	0	1	2	3	5	1

Group C

Feb 13: Uzbekistan 1-0 Yemen; Iran 3-0 Indonesia
Feb 16: Yemen 0-6 Iran; Indonesia 1-3 Uzbekistan
Feb 19: Uzbekistan 1-2 Iran; Indonesia 0-0 Yemen

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iran (Q)	3	3	0	0	11	1	9
Uzbekistan (Q)	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
Indonesia	3	0	1	2	1	6	1
Yemen	3	0	1	2	0	7	1

Group D

Feb 14: South Korea 2-1 Syria; Japan 3-0 Thailand
Feb 17: Syria 2-2 Japan; Thailand 1-4 South Korea
Feb 20: Japan 1-1 South Korea; Syria 2-2 Thailand

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
South Korea (Q)	3	2	1	0	7	3	7
Japan (Q)	3	1	2	0	6	3	5
Syria	3	0	2	1	5	6	2
Thailand	3	0	1	2	3	9	1

Quarter-Finals

Feb 22 – Shenzen
Saudi Arabia 1 (Al Yuhaybi 90+5)
China 0

Feb 22 – Shenzen
Australia 3 (Jovanovic 22, Kikianis 62, Badolato 74)
Iraq 2 (Faisal 15, Qabeel 26)

Feb 23 – Shenzen
Iran 1 (Ghandipour 5)
Japan 1 (Ogura 30)
After Extra-Time. Japan win 4-3 on pens

Feb 23 – Shenzen
South Korea 3 (Shin Min-ha 26, 56, Kim Tae-won 61)
Uzbekistan 3 (Jumaev 18, Urinboev 90, Khaydarov 90+4)
After Extra-Time. South Korea win 3-1 on pens

Semi-Finals

Feb 26 – Shenzen
Saudi Arabia 0
South Korea 0
After Extra-Time. Saudi Arabia win 3-2 on pens

Feb 26 – Shenzen
Australia 2 (Toure 49, Pearman 67)
Japan 0

Final

Mar 1 – Shenzen
Australia 1 (Agosti 24)
Saudi Arabia 1 (Haji 45+2)
After Extra-Time. Australia win 5-4 on pens

Club Football

EUROPE

2024-25 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Last 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 4 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 1 (De Cuyper 12)
Aston Villa (Eng) 3 (Bailey 3, Mechele 82 og, Asensio 88 pen)

Mar 4 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Rodrygo 4, Brahim 55)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 1 (Alvarez 32)

Mar 4 – Eindhoven
PSV (Ned) 1 (Lang 43 pen)
Arsenal (Eng) 7 (Timber 18, Nwaneri 21, Merino 31, Odegaard 47, 73, Trossard 48, Calafiori 85)

Mar 4 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 1 (Adeyemi 22)
Lille (Fra) 1 (Haraldsson 68)

Mar 5 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 0
Barcelona (Spa) 1 (Raphinha 61)

Mar 5 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 3 (Kane 9, 75 pen, Musiala 54)
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 0

Mar 5 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 0
Internazionale (Ita) 2 (Thuram 38, L. Martinez 50)

Mar 5 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 0
Liverpool (Eng) 1 (Elliott 87)

Last 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 11 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 2 (Thuram 8, Calhanoglu 51 pen)
Feyenoord (Ned) 1 (Moder 42 pen)
Internazionale win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 11 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 0
Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 (Kane 52, Davies 71)
Bayern Munich win 5-0 on aggregate

Mar 11 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 3 (Raphinha 11, 42, Yamal 27)
Benfica (Por) 1 (Otamendi 13)
Barcelona win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 11 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 0
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 1 (Dembele 12)
After Extra-Time. 1-1 on aggregate
Paris Saint-Germain win 4-1 on pens

Mar 12 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 3 (Asensio 50, 61, Maatsen 57)
Club Brugge (Bel) 0
Aston Villa win 6-1 on aggregate

Mar 12 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 2 (Zinchenko 6, Rice 37)
PSV (Ned) 2 (Perisic 18, Driouech 70)
Arsenal win 9-3 on aggregate

Mar 12 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 1 (David 5)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 2 (Can 54 pen, Beier 65)
Borussia Dortmund win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 12 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 1 (Gallagher 1)
Real Madrid (Spa) 0
After Extra-Time. 2-2 on aggregate
Real Madrid win 4-2 on pens

2024-25 EUROPA LEAGUE

Last 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 6 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1 (Durosinmi 53)
Lazio (Ita) 2 (Romagnoli 18, Isaksen 90+8)

Mar 6 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 3 (Tzolakis 13 og, Hogh 45, 55)
Olympiacos (Gre) 0

Mar 6 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 1 (Brobbey 10)
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 2 (Larsson 27, Skhiri 70)

Mar 6 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 1 (Bergvall 18 og)
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 0

Mar 6 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 2 (Angelino 56, Shomurodov 90+3)
Athletic Club (Spa) 1 (I. Williams 50)

Mar 6 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 1 (Djiku 30)
Rangers (Sco) 3 (Dessers 7, Cerny 42, 81)

Mar 6 – Bucharest
FCSB (Rou) 1 (Baluta 68)
Lyon (Fra) 3 (Tagliafico 30, Fofana 86, 89)

Mar 6 – San Sebastian
Real Sociedad (Spa) 1 (Oyarzabal 70 pen)
Manchester United (Eng) 1 (Zirkzee 57)

Last 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 13 – Rome
Lazio (Ita) 1 (Romagnoli 77)
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1 (Sulc 52)
Lazio win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Piraeus
Olympiacos (Gre) 2 (Yaremchuk 53, 65)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 1 (Hogh 36)
Bodo/Glimt win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Frankfurt
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 4 (Bahoya 7, Gotze 25, 82, Ekitike 67)
Ajax (Ned) 1 (Taylor 78)
Eintracht Frankfurt win 6-2 on aggregate

Mar 13 – London
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 3 (Odobert 26, 74, Maddison 48)
AZ (Ned) 1 (Koopmeiners 63)
Tottenham Hotspur win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Bilbao
Athletic Club (Spa) 3 (N. Williams 45+3, 82, Berchiche 68)
Roma (Ita) 1 (Paredes 90+3 pen)
Athletic Club win 4-3 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Glasgow
Rangers (Sco) 0
Fenerbahce (Tur) 2 (Szymanski 45, 73)
After Extra-Time. 3-3 on aggregate
Rangers win 3-2 on pens

Mar 13 – Lyon
Lyon (Fra) 4 (Mikautadze 14, 47, Nuamah 37, 88)
FCSB (Rou) 0
Lyon win 7-1 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Manchester
Manchester United (Eng) 4 (Fernandes 16 pen, 50 pen, 87, Dalot 90+1)
Real Sociedad (Spa) 1 (Oyarzabal 10 pen)
Manchester United win 5-2 on aggregate

2024-25 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Last 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 6 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 2 (Bakambu 48, Isco 75)
Vitoria Guimaraes (Por) 2 (Mendes 51, Oliveira 81)

Mar 6 – Bialystok
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 3 (Pululu 69 pen, 78, Romanczuk 75)
Cercle Brugge (Bel) 0

Mar 6 – Celje
Celje (Svn) 1 (Svetlin 23)
Lugano (Sui) 0

Mar 6 – Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 3 (Swiderski 5, Maksimovic 19, Tete 55)
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Beltran 20, Fagioli 23)

Mar 6 – Copenhagen
Copenhagen (Den) 1 (Pereira 79)
Chelsea (Eng) 2 (James 46, Fernandez 65)

Mar 6 – Molde
Molde (Nor) 3 (Hestad 11, Eriksen 17, Gulbrandsen 43)
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 2 (Chodyna 64, Luquinhas 67)

Mar 6 – Limassol
Pafos (Cyp) 1 (Tankovic 65)
Djurgarden (Swe) 0

Mar 6 – Banja Luka
Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 1 (Vukovic 90+2 pen)
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 1 (Beljo 34)

Last 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 13 – Guimaraes
Vitoria Guimaraes (Por) 0
Real Betis (Spa) 4 (Bakambu 5, 20, Antony 58, Isco 80)
Real Betis win 6-2 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Brugge
Cercle Brugge (Bel) 2 (Van der Bruggen 8, Felipe Augusto 50)
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 0
Jagiellonia Bialystok win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Thun
Lugano (Sui) 5 (Mahmoud 21, Koutsias 42, 80, Dos Santos 44, Doumbia 118)
Celje (Svn) 4 (Seslar 40, Svetlin 68, Kucys 90+5 pen, Nieto 97)
After Extra-Time. 5-5 on aggregate
Celje win 3-1 on pens

Mar 13 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 3 (Mandragora 12, Gudmundsson 24, Kean 75)
Panathinaikos (Gre) 1 (Ioannidis 81 pen)
Fiorentina win 5-4 on aggregate

Mar 13 – London
Chelsea (Eng) 1 (Dewsbury-Hall 55)
Copenhagen (Den) 0
Chelsea win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Warsaw
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 2 (Morishita 34, Gual 108)
Molde (Nor) 0
AET. Legia Warsaw win 4-3 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Stockholm
Djurgarden (Swe) 3 (Fallenius 35, Stensson 69, Nguen 86)
Pafos (Cyp) 0
Djurgarden win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Vienna
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 2 (Beljo 70, Schaub 96)
Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 1 (Ogrinec 66)
AET. Rapid Vienna win 3-2 on aggregate

2025 EFL CUP FINAL

Mar 16 – Wembley
Liverpool 1 (Chiesa 90+4)
Newcastle United 1 (Burn 45, Isak 52)

SOUTH AMERICA

2025 COPA LIBERTADORES

Third Stage – 1st Leg

Mar 4 – Iquique
Deportes Iquique (Chi) 1 (Zambrano 66 og)
Alianza Lima (Per) 2 (Barcos 31, Castillo 34)

Mar 5 – Arequipa
Melgar (Per) 0
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Piris Da Motta 34 pen)

Mar 5 – Guayaquil
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 3 (Corozo 45+2 pen, 84, Rivero 80)
Corinthians (Bra) 0

Mar 6 – Montevideo
Boston River (Uru) 0
Bahia (Bra) 0

Third Stage – 2nd Leg

Mar 11 – Lima
Alianza Lima (Per) 1 (Quevedo 42)
Deportes Iquique (Chi) 1 (Davila 90)
Alianza Lima win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 12 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 4 (Araujo 12, Carrizo 56, Da Costa 70, Farina 79)
Melgar (Per) 2 (Martinez 45+6 pen, Liza 89)
Cerro Porteno win 5-2 on aggregate

Mar 12 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 2 (Torres 40, Carrillo 84)
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 0
Barcelona SC win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Salvador
Bahia (Bra) 1 (Jean Lucas 59)
Boston River (Uru) 0
Bahia win 1-0 on aggregate

2025 COPA SUDAMERICANA

First Stage

Mar 4 – Cochabamba
Universitario de Vinto (Bol) 0
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 1 (Camacho 31 og)

Mar 4 – Coquimbo
Universidad Catolica (Chi) 1 (Zampedri 88)
Palestino (Chi) 1 (Carrasco 11)
Palestino win 5-4 on pens

Mar 4 – Asuncion
Sportivo Luqueno (Par) 2 (E. Vera 47, Ayala 86)
Sportivo Ameliano (Par) 0

Mar 4 – Huancayo
ADT (Per) 1 (Cedron 67)
Cienciano (Per) 1 (Choi 90+2 og)
Cienciano win 6-5 on pens

Mar 5 – Cochabamba
Aurora (Bol) 0
GV San Jose (Bol) 1 (Calero 62)

Mar 5 – Santiago
Union Espanola (Chi) 2 (Jeraldino 8, Aranguiz 45+1 pen)
Everton (Chi) 2 (I. Ramirez 2, 81 pen)
Union Espanola win 3-1 on pens

Mar 5 – Manizales
Once Caldas (Col) 1 (Barrios 80)
Millonarios (Col) 0

Mar 5 – Riobamba
Mushuc Runa (Ecu) 2 (Bentaberry 17, Simisterra 56)
Orense (Ecu) 1 (Achilier 39)

Mar 5 – Montevideo
Racing (Uru) 0
Montevideo Wanderers (Uru) 0
Racing win 4-2 on pens

Mar 5 – Valencia
Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 3 (Manzambi 52, Padron 90+1, Paredes 90+9)
Metropolitanos (Ven) 0

Mar 6 – Barranquilla
Junior (Col) 2 (Paiva 54, 71)
America de Cali (Col) 2 (Lucumi 38, Vergara 44)
America de Cali win 4-3 on pens

Mar 6 – Quito
Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 0
Aucas (Ecu) 0
Universidad Catolica win 4-2 on pens

Mar 6 – Asuncion
Guarani (Par) 2 (Mendieta 38, Torales 90+3)
2 de Mayo (Par) 0

Mar 6 – Trujillo
Atletico Grau (Per) 0
Cusco (Per) 0
Atletico Grau win 4-2 on pens

Mar 6 – Melo
Cerro Largo (Uru) 2 (Affonso 20, 45+6)
Danubio (Uru) 2 (Cardozo 49, S. Fernandez 86 pen)
Cerro Largo win 4-3 on pens

Mar 6 – Caracas
Deportivo La Guaira (Ven) 0
Caracas (Ven) 2 (Echenique 23, 56)

ASIA

2024-25 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

West Region

Round of 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 3 – Tashkent
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 1 (Flamarion 29)
Al Hilal (KSA) 0

Mar 3 – Al Rayyan
Al Rayyan (Qat) 1 (Guedes 71)
Al Ahli (KSA) 3 (Galeno 30, Mahrez 34, Al Buraikan 90+5)

Mar 4 – Tehran
Esteghlal (Irn) 0
Al Nassr (KSA) 0

Mar 4 – Dubai
Al Wasl (UAE) 1 (Saleh 3)
Al Sadd (Qat) 1 (Al Yazidi 68)

Round of 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 10 – Riyadh
Al Nassr (KSA) 3 (Duran 9, 84, Ronaldo 27 pen)
Esteghlal (Irn) 0
Al Nassr win 3-0 on aggregate

Mar 10 – Al Rayyan
Al Sadd (Qat) 3 (Meshaal 26, Atal 30, Afif 37)
Al Wasl (UAE) 1 (Lima 10)
Al Sadd win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 11 – Riyadh
Al Hilal (KSA) 4 (Al Yami 30, Malcom 42, N. Al Dawsari 51 pen, S. Al Dawsari 90+2)
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 0
Al Hilal win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 11 – Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 2 (Mahrez 77, 83)
Al Rayyan (Qat) 0
Al Ahli win 5-1 on aggregate

East Region

Round of 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 4 – Shanghai
Shanghai Port (Chn) 0
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 1 (Anderson Lopes 30)

Mar 4 – Buriram
Buriram United (Tha) 0
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 0

Mar 5 – Shanghai
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 1 (Takai 76 og)
Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn) 0

Mar 5 – Kobe
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 2 (Osako 20, Ide 29)
Gwangju (Kor) 0

Round of 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 11 – Yokohama
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 4 (Tono 2, Anderson Lopes 29, 56, Yan 44)
Shanghai Port (Chn) 1 (Leonardo 35)
Yokohama F. Marinos win 5-1 on aggregate

Mar 11 – Johor Bahru
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 0
Buriram United (Tha) 1 (Suphanat 58)
Buriram United win 1-0 on aggregate

Mar 12 – Kawasaki
Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn) 4 (Sasaki 24, Erison 64, Ito 68, Marcinho 90+1)
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 0
Kawasaki Frontale win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 12 – Gwangju
Gwangju (Kor) 3 (Park Jeong-in 18, Asani 85 pen, 118)
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 0
After Extra-Time. Gwangju win 3-2 on aggregate

2024-25 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

Quarter-Finals

West Region

Mar 4-5:
Tractor (Irn) 0-0 Al Taawoun (KSA); Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 1-1 Sharjah (UAE)
Mar 11-12:
Al Taawoun (KSA) 2-2 Tractor (Irn) (agg 2-2, *AET, Al Taawoun win 4-2 on pens*); Sharjah (UAE) 1-1 Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) (agg 2-2, *AET, Sharjah win 5-4 on pens*)

East Region

Mar 5-6:
Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) 0-3 Lion City Sailors (Idn) *awarded*; Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) 0–2 Sydney FC (Aus)
Mar 12-13:
Lion City Sailors (Idn) 1-1 Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) (agg 4-1): Sydney FC (Aus) 3-2 Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) (agg 5-2)

2024-25 AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals

West Region

Mar 5:
Al Arabi (Kuw) 1-0 Al Seeb (Oma); East Bengal (Ind) 0-1 Arkadag (Tkm)
Mar 12:
Al Seeb (Oma) 2-2 Al Arabi (Kuw) (agg 2-3, *AET*); Arkadag (Tkm) 2-1 East Bengal (Ind) (agg 3-1)

East Region

Mar 6:
Preah Khan Reach Svay Rieng (Cam) 6–2 Shan United (Mya); Tainan City (Tpe) 0-0 Madura United (Idn)
Mar 13:
Shan United (Mya) 2-1 Preah Khan Reach Svay Rieng (Cam) (agg 4-7); Madura United (Idn) 3-0 Tainan City (Tpe) (agg 3-0)

LAOS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ezra (C)	14	12	2	0	56	13	38
Young Elephants	14	11	1	2	41	12	34
Master 7	14	9	2	3	40	18	29
Luangprabang FC	14	8	0	6	28	19	24
Lao Army	14	5	1	8	28	38	16
Namtha United	14	3	3	8	23	24	12
Viengchanh	14	1	3	10	14	58	6
Champasak FC	14	1	0	13	15	63	3

CONCACAF

2025 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS CUP

Last 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 4 – Los Angeles
LAFC (USA) 3 (Bouanga 20, 46, Ordaz 81)
Columbus Crew (USA) 0

Mar 4 – Mexico City
Pumas UNAM (Mex) 2 (Ergas 38, Funes Mori 73)
Alajuelense (Crc) 0

Mar 4 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati (USA) 1 (Bucha 3)
Tigres UANL (Mex) 1 (Ibanez 17)

Mar 5 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 1 (Halbouni 86)
Monterrey (Mex) 1 (De la Rosa 25)

Mar 5 – Heredia
Herediano (Crc) 1 (Aguilar 64)
LA Galaxy (USA) 0

Mar 5 – Zapopan
Guadalajara (Mex) 1 (Caceres 77 og)
America (Mex) 0

Mar 5 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders (USA) 0
Cruz Azul (Mex) 0

Mar 6 – Fort Lauderdale
Inter Miami (USA) 2 (Allende 61, Suarez 83)
Cavalier (Jam) 0

Last 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 11 – Columbus
Columbus Crew (USA) 2 (Russell-Rowe 10, Rossi 45 pen)
LAFC (USA) 1 (Bouanga 90+6)
LAFC win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 11 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL (Mex) 3 (Herrera 64, Brunetta 69, Ibanez 73)
FC Cincinnati (USA) 1 (Evander 18)
Tigres UANL win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 11 – Mexico City
Cruz Azul (Mex) 4 (Rodriguez 33, Sepulveda 71 pen, Romero 85, Sanchez 88)
Seattle Sounders (USA) 1 (Musovski 75)
Cruz Azul win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 12 –Torreon
Monterrey (Mex) 2 (Canales 4, Ramos 90+7 pen)
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 2 (Ocampo 57, White 78)
3-3 on aggregate.
Vancouver Whitecaps win on away goals

Mar 12 – Los Angeles
LA Galaxy (USA) 4 (Aude 30, Berry 39, Gabriel Pec 53, Ramirez 76)
Herediano (Crc) 1 (Gonzalez 83)
LA Galaxy win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 12 – Mexico City
America (Mex) 4 (Rodriguez 6, Valdes 45, Zendejas 65, Fidalgo 79)
Guadalajara (Mex) 0
America win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Alajuela
Alajuelense (Crc) 1 (Campos 39)
Pumas UNAM (Mex) 1 (Suarez 72)
Pumas UNAM win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Kingston
Cavalier (Jam) 0
Inter Miami (USA) 2 (Suarez 37 pen, Messi 90+2)
Inter Miami win 4-0 on aggregate

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Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations – and beyond

Long wait...Kawasaki Frontale goalkeeper Shunsuke Ando

JAPANESE BENCH-WARMER MAKES RARE OUTING

Back-up goalkeepers can often go quite some time without making an appearance, but few have had to wait as long for a taste of action as Kawasaki Frontale shot-stopper Shunsuke Ando. The 34-year-old, who had not played a single minute of competitive football since 2016, was given the nod for the AFC Champions League Elite clash with the Central Coast Mariners. He showed no signs of rustiness, keeping a clean sheet in a 2-0 win that secured second place for Kawasaki in the East region league phase of Asia's premier club competition.

At the time of writing, Ando had not played again since, and looks unlikely to add to his meagre career tally of 25 appearances in 16 years any time soon. One might expect the lack of game time to be demotivating, but not for Ando: "Playing the other night was such a joyful occasion for me," said the goalie, who believes his motivation would have waned if he had left his beloved Kawasaki Frontale. Aside from a loan to Shonan Bellmare in 2013, during which he made 60 per cent of his total career appearances, he has been with his boyhood club since turning professional in 2009.

FIERCE WIND WREAKS HAVOC IN THE FAROES

Supporters of promoted FC Suduroy were looking forward to their team's first top-flight match in a decade on the opening day of the season, only to have their big moment delayed by an all-too-familiar foe: the wind. It has a reputation for being so fierce in the Faroe Islands – no point of which is more than 5km away from the sea – that the league has a special rule to help the players on the blustery archipelago. It states that when a set-piece is taken, a team-mate may hold onto the ball so that the wind does not blow it away during the run-up.

While FC Suduroy fans were cursing the weather, fellow top-flight newcomers TB Tvoroyri, who are based on the same island, were holding reigning champions Vikingur to a surprise 1-1 draw. It was certainly no mean feat given that TB finished in third place in the second tier last season and only went up because the Vikingur reserves, who finished top, could not be promoted to the same division as their title-winning senior side. If the early indications are anything to go by, it looks set to be an interesting season in the Faroes – as long as the wind doesn't get in the way.

ALDERNEY'S MURATTI VASE MISERY CONTINUES

While San Marino endured the longest winless streak of any FIFA nation ever between 2004 and 2024 (140 matches), Alderney are probably their closest equivalent in the non-FIFA world. The Channel Islanders have been competing in the Muratti Vase – an annual three-team tournament in which they face neighbours Jersey and Guernsey in the semi-final on an alternating basis – for well over a century now. But they have lost every single match they have played in it since their sole triumph back in 1920 – a winless run that now stands at 105 years following their defeat to Jersey in the 2025 edition.

Jersey will face Guernsey in the final on Saturday, May 17, aiming to win the trophy for a sixth successive year – a feat that neither island has achieved since the 1960s.

Lee Wingate

COMING UP...

Western United v Auckland FC
A-League, May 3
Auckland FC of New Zealand were only founded last year, but they top the A-League table at the time of writing. They travel to Western United, currently in second place, on the final day of the regular season in Australia's top flight.

Grindavik v Fjolnir
Icelandic First Division, May 9
A series of volcanic eruptions forced Grindavik's 3,800 residents and second-tier football team to relocate. But, with no major seismic activity recorded this year, the club has struck a deal with Iceland's FA to return. This will be their homecoming.

Tromso v Bodo/Glimt
Norwegian Eliteserien, May 16
The two most northernly professional football clubs in the world are set to meet for the first Arctic Circle derby of the season in the Norwegian top flight. Tromso will have home advantage, but Bodo/Glimt are the reigning champions.

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